The Aesthetics of Immersion and Detachment in the British Natural Sublime: A Historical Perspective

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The conceptual push and pull between distance and proximity has emerged as one of the leading rhetorical, theoretical, and ethical debates in the fields at the forefront of environmental studies, reaching from eco criticism and cultural geography to visual studies. The competing narratives associated with both forms of nature appreciation have been crucial to the manner in which the idea of landscape has been conceived and evaluated. Traditionally distance has remained the most consistent aesthetic property associated with the appreciation of landscape, emphasizing the necessity of framing mechanisms and the role of the observer in order to maintain a form of conceptual stability. During the past several decades this account of landscape aesthetics has ignited a passionate backlash by critics and theorists across multiple fields keen to disassociate environmental studies from this strict dichotomy between subject and object. The critical development has led many practitioners to reverse the original framework, placing proximity, or a unifying form of embeddeness, at the forefront of the debate, providing a way for multiple theorists, critics, and artists to readopt the concept of landscape back into their work.

This new emphasis on immersion has not been accepted whole heartedly though. Cultural geographer John Wylie has referred to it as a troubling renegotiation of the dichotomy. Describing this phenomenological approach as focusing directly on “ideas of dwelling” and “an ongoing ensemble of life-practices and life-journeys,” Wylie argues that a focus on an association which directly intertwines natural and cultural practices provides a closed argument.

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which threatens to re-impose “notions of authentic dwelling-in-the-world, of ‘proper’ placing
and belonging, or ...extremis notions of immanent community coinciding with itself and with the
land”². Each of these assumptions conceals the complexities at stake when defining the role and
concept of landscape: “If we accept that the term landscape names a ‘way of seeing’ the world
and also, consequentially, a way of seeing-with the world...then here we are seeing-with them
and taking leave of them, all at once.”³ Our subjectivity is always both being constructed by our
movements through the natural and built world and constructing those environments in turn.
Wylie argues that this continuous push and pull is precisely why the concept of landscape has
remained such a powerful cultural concept.

While this debate between proximity and distance has been pivotal to both the historical
and contemporary incarnations of the field of environmental aesthetics, scholars have been rarely
interested in mapping out the manner in which the debate emerged in the first place. This article
seeks to rectify that missing link by reassessing the role these two forms of experience took at
the critical period when environmental aesthetics first appeared amongst debates of taste in Great
Britain. The concept which acted as a catalyst for its emergence in the 18th century was the
natural sublime. The sublime constructed a powerful and precarious dialectic when prescribing
where a person needed to be physically placed in order to experience its particular state of
appreciation. At the center of that dialectic was the problem of balancing the competing values
associated with proximity and distance.

In spite of the fact that the natural sublime played a key role during the onset of the field,
the concept has gone on to have a contentious relationship with environmental aesthetics.

Usually associated with the German philosophical tradition rather than the British, the sublime

² John Wylie, “Landscape, absence and the geographies of love.” Transactions of the Institute of British
Geographers 34.3 (2009): 287.
³ Wylie, 282.
has come to represent the placement of reason over the natural world where opposition is foregrounded over exchange and engagement. With that framework in place critics and theorists from a range of disciplines, have, in the past, interpreted the concept as symbolizing a hierarchical relationship between the internal and external world. More recently both the fields of environmental aesthetics and eco criticism have seen a small revival of interest in the subject, turning, in much the same way as contemporary landscape practitioners, toward the more subtle aspects of the natural sublime, like immersion and the role of the body in framing the imagination.

Even with this renewed set of debates, theorists continue to take a piecemeal approach when considering any historical precursors. Both sides have neglected a whole host of other early philosophical accounts of the sublime, especially within the British context where the complex entanglement of self in nature was directly at stake. While figures like Immanuel Kant and, to a lesser extent, Edmund Burke, dominate the debate, many of the leading philosophers and critics, including Joseph Addison, John Bailie, Alexander Gerard, James Usher and Helen Maria Williams, who discussed the roles of proximity and distance, have failed to make an appearance. These accounts offer environmental aesthetics a very different set of conditions and questions in which to consider our epistemological and aesthetic relationship with the natural world. Unlike the importance Kant placed on the potential of the internal faculties to control the

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4 One example of this dependence is Thomas Weiskel’s *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1976) which uses Kant’s definition of the sublime to explore canonical pieces of English Romantic poetry.

effects of the natural world, the British debate over embodied viewpoint was much more interested in the interdependent roles of both the external world and internal faculties.6

This article maps out the complex construction of the philosophical concept of the sublime over the 18th century through the key British thinkers and critics debating its role in relation to the appreciation of nature. It provides a new interpretation of that historical material by isolating those figures who emphasized the model of spectatorship necessary for experiencing the sublime, arguing that this discussion is in fact one of the most useful facets of the debate for the contemporary field.7 Even though the concept was discussed in relation to many different highly contradictory methodological frameworks, over the course of the century a particular through-line began to emerge. The sublime was described as the pairing of two very unlikely models of spectatorship—astonishment and contemplation. Even more incredibly, the first was quickly understood to be the catalyst for the second. The seeming inherent paradox upon which the sublime operated was necessarily precarious; it could only be experienced under very specific internal and external conditions. Many of the leading critics and theorists of the time felt it necessary to prescribe a specific model of address in order to attain and legitimize the aesthetic

6 One reason for this was the role the sublime played in Kant’s larger philosophical argument. The aesthetic concept constructed the link between the faculty of Reason, an awareness of the God, and moral feeling by emphasizing the power of the faculty to conceive of concepts like the infinite. See Kant’s *The Critique of Judgment*. Trans. J. H. Bernard (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2000).

experience. Yet, rather than aiding in solidifying a single conceptual framework for the term, this concern for spectatorship and experience only increased the tension surrounding the concept.

The Natural Sublime in Contemporary Accounts of Aesthetic Appreciation

While the natural sublime has been maligned by environmental scholars, it has, within the few past decades, made a small comeback both within eco criticism and the field of environmental aesthetics. Two of the main figures in the latter, Sandra Shapshay and Emily Brady, have used the term as an alternative and/or complimentary approach to the leading framework proposed by Allen Carlson. While these accounts all still struggle with disentangling the Kantian formula, they have begun to re-consider the relationship between immersion and detachment.

In a similar manner to environmental ethics, which spent its formative years attempting to differentiate itself from prior anthropocentric ethical frameworks, early proponents of environmental aesthetics began by attempting to negotiate the place of the natural world within the larger artistic frameworks. Allen Carlson’s model quickly emerged at the forefront of the field. Carlson’s framework states that the properties that we value when we appreciate nature are those that we can only isolate because they can be subsumed under specific scientific categories and laws. In constructing this new model of appreciation Carlson is attempting to move away from the traditional relationship between nature and art appreciation which has either forced nature to be confined to the same aesthetic requirements as, or dependent on, previous access to art objects.

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While Carlson’s model seems to leave little room for the conceptually precarious and largely metaphoric natural sublime, several philosophers have attempted to compare the two in the past few years. In a recent article published in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, philosopher Sandra Shapshay debates the merits of two different accounts of the sublime and their relevance to contemporary environmental aesthetics. The first she connects to Noël Carroll’s model of aesthetic appreciation and calls the “thin approach”. This one follows Edmund Burke’s line of reasoning and is visceral rather than intellective. She defines it as “a basic but unreflective cognitive appraisal of the situation and the resultant physiological experience of the subject’s pain.” She contrasts this with what she calls the “thick approach” which follows from Kant’s formulation and falls necessarily on the side of the intellect. She describes it as “an aesthetic response to vast or powerful environments or phenomena in nature that is emotional as well as intellectual and involves reflection upon the relationships between humanity and nature more generally.” This active response is “akin to (without being modelled on) the activity of interpreting a metaphor” where one is more interested in the play of ideas rather than following a logical series of “entailments”.

Shapshay argues that even though at first glance neither approach to the sublime seems to be applicable to Carlson’s scientific cognitivism, there is an important place for the thick version, and, to a much lesser extent, the thin one, within the field. Both versions represent a necessary tool in solving a problem created by Carlson’s own model, that of the relationship between spectator and environment. She writes,

…it is actually a consequence (though an unacknowledged one) of Carlson’s injunction to appreciate nature as an environment rather than as a discrete

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9 Shapshay, 187.
10 Ibid., 189.
11 Ibid., 189.
object that invites and even sometimes demands subjective reflection in experiences of the environmental sublime. While objects obviously tend to have pretty determinate contours, natural environments have much hazier boundaries and are in need of more subjective framing. Further, and crucially, sublime environments tend to be vast or to contain overwhelmingly powerful forces that bring the issue of the human appreciator/framer right to the fore. Thus, especially with respect to sublime environments, the environmental focus enjoined by scientific cognitivism implicates the subject in the aesthetic experience in a manner that has gone largely unnoticed by this theory. 12

Here, in much the same manner as this article, Shapshay isolates the act of framing, the role of the spectator, and the manner in which he or she appreciates as the sublime’s most valuable properties vis-a-vis contemporary environmental concerns. The sublime demonstrates a model of reflection which can explain components of nature appreciation that exceed the environmental model without changing the core properties that define it. While certain scientific knowledge will enhance and create a deeper appreciation of a specific environment, no amount of information will prevent a spectator from feeling some sense of awe because this response is a result of the relationship between environment and subject that is necessarily implicated when engaging in empirical judgments.

Emily Brady uses a slightly different reading of Kant in order to develop her own position on the contemporary role of the sublime in aesthetic appreciation. Rather than construct an account drawn in relation to scientific cognitivism, she puts forward a non-cognitivist perspective via Kant’s discussion of the imagination rather than reason: “Shapshay interprets both Kant’s and Schopenhauer’s views of the sublime as having cognitive or intellective components, whereas I have interpreted the more reflective aspects in terms of aesthetic feel or

12 Ibid., 193.
aesthetic apprehension—a feeling for our freedom, for instance, rather than a cognitive recognition of that or the acquisition of some new belief within the aesthetic experience.”\footnote{Brady,189.}

Brady recognizes the crucial role of the second stage of the sublime and interprets the third, where introspection leads to an equilibrium between inner and outer world, as centered around the faculty of the imagination. She writes, “Most commentators simply leave the role of imagination at that: it fails. But, as I argued... imagination functions in vital ways in that experience of failure. It is expanded and opened out in an attempt to take in the apparently infinite, yet that activity in itself reveals a distinctive way imagination operates in the aesthetic response.”\footnote{Ibid., 193}

By developing an interpretation of Kant that explores the imagination, Brady is attempting to avoid the criticisms of eco critics who argue that Kant’s sublime largely fosters an anthropocentric ideology in relation to nature.\footnote{Of course Brady and Shapshay were in no way the first to critically reformulate the distinction applied to subject and nature or subject and world. Many German philosophers writing after Kant, like Friedrich Schelling, challenged this dichotomy, though their focus was on the larger metaphysical issues which arose from Kant’s philosophical framework rather than on the characteristics of a sublime experience.}

Here embodiment and proximity are pushed to the forefront of the philosophical framework, either as they relate to the direction of attention and perceptual awareness or to the overlap of different categories of knowledge.

Brady shares this emphasis with other proponents of the sublime within the field of eco criticism: dissolve the dichotomy between subject and object while preserving the potentiality of the natural other. Christopher Hitt refers to this shift as the “ecological sublime”. Rather than reducing the function of “the sublime encounter” to an “estrangement” from the natural world,\footnote{Hitt, 605.} Hitt invests his critical energy in re-establishing the central role of immersion and embodiment within the natural sublime. In a similar vein, other critics, like Arnold Berleant, have argued that the role of disinterestedness and contemplative distance only limit the discourses surrounding
environmental aesthetics. Berleant describes astonishment as “times of sensory acuteness, of a perceptual unity of nature and human, of a congruity of awareness, understanding, and involvement mixed with awe and humility, in which the focus is on the immediacy and directness of the occasion of experience. Perceiving environment from within, as it were, looking not at it but in it”\footnote{Berleant, 236.}, in short performing as an “aesthetics of engagement”\footnote{Ibid., 237.}. Disinterested appreciation was made possible by enclosure devices that could isolate and construct a sense of separation and distance. In contrast, the sublime offered a model which accounted for experiences which exceeded the powers of the framing apparatus. Berleant argues that the concept could offer a “distinctive aesthetic of nature”\footnote{Ibid., 234.} based on “continuity”, “assimilation” and the interplay of subject and landscape rather than isolation and control.\footnote{Ibid., 235.} This model understands the subject to be a participant in lived experience rather than observer, in this sense bestowing upon both the natural world and the internal faculties an important role in constructing the ever evolving state of appreciation.

With this growing attention toward the “humbling fear”\footnote{Hitt., 606.} of the second stage, and the paradoxical role of the self, come larger questions as to why environmental aesthetics and eco criticism spend so little time reflectively examining other key historical theorists and critics who made the dialectic of embodiment and detachment central to their frameworks. As we have seen the weaving of rhetoric associated with different immersive and contemplative embodied positions continues to permeate throughout both popular and theoretical environmental debate.
Reflection on its historical philosophical roots offers some perspective on the problematic nature of foregrounding one mode of experience over the other.

**The Emergence of the Natural Sublime**

The 18\textsuperscript{th} century placed great emphasis on firsthand contact with nature in order to cultivate the appropriate standard of taste. As Berleant has argued, the shift was problematic because it precluded the framing devices which made previous theories of knowledge and taste consistent and stable. The introduction of the sublime into the British lexicon was symptomatic of this larger tension. The experience was driven by new modes of spectatorship like immersion and engagement that had been hitherto unexplored. If in fact certain natural objects and landscapes could elicit pleasure which was not dictated by classical rules of beauty then a standard of discovery was in order. Contemporary literary theorist Thomas Weiskel understood the sublime (in both its rhetorical and natural incarnations) to be a historical expression, masking the tensions which were symptomatic of the loss of traditional spiritual and ontological frameworks which had previously defined the relationship between subject and object.\textsuperscript{22} Whether emphasizing primary or secondary causes, the relationship between cause and effect was at the centre of every framework for discussing the sublime introduced within the century. The position of the spectator had a fundamental effect on the requirements of the two. A balance between proximity and distance dictated the possibility of the sublime experience because it offered the spectator both an immediate embodied response and contemplative space. These two experiential modes were key to the “astonishment” which dictated both the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century sublime.

The discourse of the sublime addressed this issue even in its initial stages. At the onset of 18th century Joseph Addison developed his conceptual framework around objects and landscapes that presented the Great. These landscapes mirrored those which he appreciated and was overwhelmed by on his own Grand Tour at the turn of the century. He likens this pleasure of the imagination to the experience of the understanding when it contemplates freedom and infinity. Experiencing the unbounded, the vast, and the Great necessitated a specific distance and framing mechanism in order to be attainable. In a letter written during his trip to Italy, he describes Ripaille near Lake Geneva as follows:

They have a large forest cut into walks, that are extremely thick and gloomy, and very suitable to the genius of the inhabitants. There are vistas upon the lake, at one side of the walks you have a near prospect of the Alps, which are broken into so many steps and precipices, that they fill the mind with an agreeable kind of horror, and form one of the most irregular, misshapen scenes in the world.23

This same distance and contemplative space is referred to again in *The Spectator* when describing the role of the secondary pleasure of the imagination; “It is for the same reason that we are delighted with reflecting upon dangers that are past, or in looking on a precipice at a distance, which would fill us with a different kind of horror if we saw it hanging over our heads.”24 When an observer remains too near to certain objects they tend to press “too close upon [the observer’s] senses” and, in turn, deny the opportunity of the viewer to “reflect” back on themselves.25 Terror may not make up an essential component of Addison’s conceptual framework, but it is certainly gestured towards when discussing the relationship between distance and proximity, and, pain and pleasure.

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24 Addison, 68.
25 Ibid., 68.
While Burke may have been the first to focus primarily on terror (and its associations to power), the link between pain and pleasure, and, spectatorial engagement, emerged quite early in the century. In “An Essay on the Sublime” John Bailie argues that the expansion which occurs internally is immediate, as soon as the object of the sublime presents itself “we are affected by it.”26 This immediacy is to a certain degree universal because it is dependent on the senses rather than a particular internal faculty which would need to be cultivated. He writes, “Few are so insensible, as not to be struck even at first view with what is truly sublime...”27 He goes on to say that the “object can only be justly called the sublime, which in some degree disposes the mind to this enlargement of itself, and gives her a lofty conception of her own powers.”28 That “enlargement” of self is dependant at first on the senses and the access they give to the material world;

when a flood of light bursts in, and the vast heavens are on every side widely extended to the eye, it is then the soul enlarges, and would stretch herself out to the immense expanse... for whatever the essence of the soul may be, it is the reflections arising from sensations only which makes her acquainted with herself, and know her faculties. Vast objects occasion vast sensations, vast sensations give the mind a higher idea of her own powers...29

Astonishment is described here as a twofold process, beginning with our immediate awareness of the world and then ourselves.

27 Bailie, 88.
28 Ibid.,88.
29 Ibid., 88-89.
The vastness of the object or scene is best able to offer astonishment when it is uniform or composed of “one large and grand idea” compelling a “complete prospect”.\(^{30}\) This means that even if the senses cannot access the complete object, the imagination can extrapolate out and attempt to expand to the outer reaches, as in the case of the ocean or a mountain. This uniformity and immediacy create a model of astonishment which “rather composes, than agitates the mind”\(^{31}\) and constructs a “solemn sedateness”\(^{32}\) that is contrasted to both the Pathetic and fear. Bailie’s description of the affective response is very similar to Addison who imagines it as “a delightful stillness”\(^{33}\). This form of astonishment seems almost contradictory. Rather than becoming overwhelmed by the combination of visceral and internal expansion, pleasure arises at the same time as a contemplative space opens up. This stillness operates on the same two levels as that which could completely overwhelm; the subject ceases moving through the space and remains physically transfixed at the same time as the mind ceases moving between different sets of ideas and just begins to consider what is directly in front of it.

The first of these two levels could also be used to describe the physical reaction to immense fear. The difference between fear and the sublime is a matter of physical vantage point, and, because of the precarious nature of that position, the two often find themselves intermingling. Bailie uses the example of a storm, stating that if “a person is actually in one” the “dread may be so heightened... as entirely to destroy the sublime”.\(^{34}\) While the “Sublime dilates and elevates the Soul, Fear sinks and contracts it; yet both are felt upon viewing what is great and awful.”\(^{35}\) In this case astonishment is dependent on which response is stronger. That often

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 89.
\(^{31}\) Ibid., 90.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., 97.
\(^{33}\) Addison, 62.
\(^{34}\) Bailie, 96-97.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., 97.
comes down to which senses are directly affected. At the end of the essay he states that two of the five senses are responsible for the experience of the sublime: sight and sound. Taste, smell or touch are each unable to grasp the “great”\textsuperscript{36}. In this case Bailie is primarily interested in their representational potential: Can a taste ever present the imagination with properties which could fall within the quality of the Great? What remains unstated is that the two he chooses to isolate allow for a detached form of contact which could be attained from different distances while the other three necessitate direct physical contact. The intermingling of pain and pleasure, and the manner in which the senses are engaged presents the precarious nature of the sublime moment. The object, which affects the mind, must be close enough to be singled out from the rest of the landscape and create a single and uniform impression on the mind but not so close to actually agitate and register as fear. So while there may be many positions which can induce an experience of beauty and the picturesque, there are really only a few variables which can create the immediacy necessary to experience the purely or primarily sublime.

Burke expresses the same kind of difficulties in defining the possibility and limits to sublime engagement. His description of the vantage point is easily the most cited throughout the century. He writes,

\begin{quote}
In all these cases, if the pain and terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person, as these emotions clear the parts, whether fine, or gross, of a dangerous and troublesome pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror; which as it belongs to self-preservation is one of the strongest of all the passions. Its object is the sublime.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 100.
The effect of that object is, for Burke, astonishment which is “that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force.”38 Here again position allows for the essential combination of terror and safety which constructs the delight associated with self-preservation. Like Bailie, astonishment involves a form of immediacy and slowing down, but in this case thought (and physical motion) is temporally suspended as the imagination of the subject allows itself to be penetrated by the object. That contact seems to prevent any mediation by reason making the contemplation in question only a secondary response. Astonishment begins very much like that created by sheer terror, but because the subject is far enough away to be aware of his own safety his mind is able to allow itself to expand and contemplate that expansion both through the object in question and in relation to the interplay among sensation, imagination and reason.

While Burke and Bailie refer to the psychological and physiological attributes linking proximity and distance, others, like Gerard, described the problem using more typical aesthetic terminology. When Gerard refers to the expansion which causes the pleasurable sensation associated with astonishment he reasserts the role of the frame. Gerard refers to a “spreading” of one’s imagination across the depth and breadth of the natural phenomena which in turn “enlivens and invigorates” the internal frame established by the imagination in the first place. 39 Here the aesthetic term comes to stand in for the internal limitations imposed on the imagination by the

aspects of the senses and embodied experience. As the mind attempts to take in the immensity or vastness of a particular feature it strains itself to overcome multiple visual and epistemological obstacles, this tension and eventual recovery constructs both stages of astonishment and contemplation. Gerard seems to create a clever overlap between theoretical and popular discourses, using the new taste for features like mountainscapes which overwhelmed traditional framing mechanisms to explore the internal properties of the observer’s mind.

**A Form of Astonishment which can elicit Contemplation**

In the second half of the 18th century many critics responded to the question over the physiological and experiential response of astonishment. Did astonishment lead to stillness, suspension, agitation or some combination of all three? If the mind of the spectator was suspended all together within the sublime moment what caused ideas to begin to resurface? Could the mind be arrested to the point where it would be unable to regain its ability for introspection until the spectator had physically moved on? What would that mean for critics who were attempting to study their own experiences in order to understand the nature of cause and effect?

James Usher tackled these issues in his *Clio; or a Discourse on Taste* published in 1769. His description of astonishment shifts between suspension and complete absorption before considering how the mind is able to regain its composure and strength. He begins by stating that the sublime “takes possession of our attention, and of all our faculties, and absorbs them in astonishment... we feel ourselves alarmed, our motions are suspended, and we remain for some time until the emotion wears off, wrapped in silence and inquisitive horror.”

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sublime invokes a certain degree of terror, in its “presence” the spectator “seems to be raised out of a trance; [his soul] assumes an unknown grandeur; it is seized with a new appetite, that in a moment effaces its former little prospects and desires”. Astonishment causes the mind to “dilate” and that expansion creates a “new appetite” fueled by transgressing limits that in everyday circumstances remain unconsidered. Again, like in Burke, suspension and absorption construct a paradoxical effect and that effect is responsible for the pleasure that arises in the subject. Usher describes the physical position of his subject when engaged in a sublime moment in considerable detail:

Observe this mountain that rises so high on the left, if we had been farther removed from it, you might see behind it other mountains rising in obscurity, your imagination labours to travel over them, and the inhabitants seem to reside in a superior world. But here you have a different prospect, the next mountain covers all the rest from your view, and by its nearest approach, presents distinctly to your eye objects of new admiration. The rocks on its sides meet the clouds in vast irregularity; the pensive eye traces the rugged precipice down to the bottom, and surveys there the mighty ruins that time has mouldered and tumbled below. It is easy in this instance to discover that we are terrified and silenced into awe, at the vestiges we see of immense power; and the more manifest are the appearances of disorder, and the neglect of contrivance, the more plainly we feel the boundless might these rude monuments are owing to. But beside this silent fear, we feel our curiosity roused from its deepest springs in the soul; and while we tremble, we are seized with an exquisite delight, that attends on sublime objects only.

Rather than the vast open landscapes which open up in front of the spectator from a high vantage point like Addison’s favourite views, Usher explores those places where the eye moves vertically, up towards the heavens and down to the earth below. This spectator is in many ways closed in by his proximity to the mountainscape. By isolating him and eliciting a direct and

41 Usher, 147.
42 Ibid., 148-149.
immediate visceral sensation of awe drawn in part from terror, the spectator is unable to allow his mind to wander. This description sounds very much like that expressed by the early Alpine travelers in the century which preceded it. It connects “disorder” and “neglect” of direct purpose to a power which is beyond our comprehension.43

Critics and philosophers writing during the period either fell on the side of stillness or complete suspension when discussing the role of astonishment in relation to physical vantage point. The possibility of internal cessation caused some critics, like Lord Kames, to focus on the role of contemplation as a way of minimizing the effects of astonishment. Kames argued that some objects and associational ideas could cause the mind to plummet when the elevation and expansion which would be necessary to hold the object within one’s mind was deemed impossible. For Kames this meant that the spectator could only approach and encounter an object in a certain manner, making the possibility of experiencing the sublime even more precarious; “the strongest emotion of grandeur, is raised by an object that can be taken in at one view; if so immense as not to be comprehended but in parts, it tends rather to distract than satisfy the mind: in like manner, the strongest emotion produced by elevation, is where the object is seen distinctly; a greater elevation lessens in appearance the object, till it vanishes out of sight with its pleasant emotions.” 44 When the object is seen from that specific point of view, properties directly allied with beauty, like proportion, regularity, and order, are not perceptible through the

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43 Three of the most well known travelers and writers of the 17th century, Thomas Coryat, James Howell, and John Evelyn, all confessed to being afraid as they passed over the mountain range. Howell described the Alps as “high and hideous” and, while comparing the Welsh mountains to them, wrote “they are but Pigmies compar’d to Giants, but Blisters to Imposthumes, or Pimples to Warts” (Epistolae Ho-Elianae: The Familiar Letters (London, 1890)), 95. Mountains were imperfections to these travelers, confusing distortions on an otherwise well proportioned and pleasing piece of countryside. See Marjorie Hope Nicholson, Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959), 69.

senses or by the imagination, but a pleasurable emotion is felt none the less. That means that a shift in position, rather than change in object, dramatically alters the properties necessary for specific aesthetic experiences. Unlike the other philosophers that have been discussed, who valued the interplay between proximity and distance, Kames was able to negotiate a balance between previously held conventions of taste and that of the contradictory nature of the sublime by highlighting the role of distance. The position of the observer always remained detached and able to frame the landscape before him in a certain manner. This natural sublime harkens back to Addison’s notion of the Great. It values contemplation over the role of astonishment and warns of the dangers of reaching too far past the everyday uses of the imagination.

By the end of the century travelers to the Continent were keen to experience the sublime effects that had been described by critics and philosophers. Poet Helen Maria Williams dedicated much of her own Grand Tour to testing what she had only previously read. In A Tour in Switzerland, published in 1798, she explores both her anticipation over experiencing the majesty of the Alps and the relationship between that anticipation and what she came to see once actually there. Rather than being surprised by her experience, like those who traveled at the beginning of the century, she had grown up immersed within the promise of the 18th century sublime. She wrote, “how often had the idea of those stupendous mountains filled my heart with enthusiastic awe! - so long, so eagerly, had I desired to contemplate that scene of wonders, that I was unable to trace when first the wish was awakened in my bosom- it seemed from childhood to have made a part of my existence”. That cultural experience had made her acutely aware of the importance of choosing an appropriate vantage point, something which she describes extensively in her

book. Her trip to the Alps involved a series of different visceral and contemplative positions as she attempted to get as close to different sublime objects and vistas as possible. The first of these views did not leave her disappointed:

When we reached the summit of the hill which leads to the fall of the Rhine, we alighted from the carriage, and walked down the steep bank, whence I saw the river turbulently over its bed of rocks, and heard the noise of the torrent, towards which we were descending, increasing as we drew near. My heart swelled with expectation- our path, as if formed to give the scene its full effect, concealed for some time the river from our view; till we reached a wooden balcony, projecting on the edge of the water, and whence, just sheltered from the torrent, it bursts in all its overwhelming wonders on the astonished sight. That stupendous cataract, rushing with wild impetuosity over those broken, unequal rocks, which, lifting up their sharp points amidst its sea of foam, disturb its headlong course, multiply its falls, and make the afflicted waters roar... never, never can I forget the sensations of that moment!  

There are two things worth noting in this excerpt. The first is the manner in which she emphasizes sound in order to address the complexity of her feeling of overwhelming astonishment. She hears the thunder of the waterfall well before she can see it. This seems to prepare her and guide her expectations and anticipation as she draws closer. The second interesting aspect is the way contact is made possible through the use of a small bridge. This allows her to stand right underneath and look directly up without putting her in much physical danger. The bridge offers tourists the opportunity to sense the precarious interplay which many of the thinkers interested in the sublime had described. It becomes a symbolic tool of encounter, changing the physical and intellectual limits of the environment.

47 Williams, 304.
This outward experience created an internal effect which brought the accounts offered by Burke, Usher and Kames to their ultimate conclusion. While feeling as if her “heart were bursting with emotions too strong to be sustained”\textsuperscript{48} she described “a sort of annihilation of self”\textsuperscript{49} where her imagination is suspended and memory of those “impression[s] erased”\textsuperscript{50}. She is no longer aware of herself or of the time that passes as she stands on the balcony transfixed.

By tracing the key threads of the debate surrounding the natural sublime across the century the precarious nature of the British incarnation becomes apparent. The placement and movement of the subject was one of the most heavily debated in the British tradition, its importance to the concept was repeatedly emphasized by philosophers and critics. By the end of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century those thinkers had gotten no closer to agreeing upon either the causal link between subject, natural phenomena and affective response, or the role of proximity and distance in orchestrating the aesthetic state. But, even while their methodological and theoretical frameworks differed substantially, a pattern did emerge surrounding the concept of astonishment over the course of the century. The internal state became the catalyst for what was understood traditionally as its antithesis, contemplation, complicating and problematizing previous structures of taste.

The novelty of the sublime experience necessitated a new understanding of both states which breached their previously established frameworks. The term ‘sublime’ attempted to make sense of and legitimize the experience by constructing a new dialectic. It was, in this sense, emblematic of the metaphoric process, conceptualizing an experience which exceeded the bounds of previous literal and figurative meaning in order to allow the subject to negotiate the

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 304.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 304.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 304.
world around them in a coherent manner. Alongside this interpretive process the term also took on a greater symbolic role in the cultural realm. Both prescriptive modes acted as ways of diffusing two interrelated forms of anxiety permeating through the period in question; the massive economic and social upheaval caused by industrialization and the increasingly indeterminate relationship that that upheaval produced with regards to the natural landscape.

The complexity of the British discourse was its most important strength, offering the proceeding century multiple tangents to continue to explore. The concept went on to address its paradoxical nature by building a domestic tourism industry that would eventually perform as its own marker of national heritage. The concept became sought after because of this elusiveness, because it demanded a point of view that was completely novel for the period, somewhere between previous models of aesthetic pleasure, where proximity and distance touched. Here the point was not so much about how balance was recovered between the world and self but rather what the astonishment and humility of the second stage said about previous preconceptions of that balance.

Unlike contemporary readings of the natural sublime, the historical material does not promote one mode of experience over the other. Instead it values the dialectic constructed within the process of moving through natural spaces. In a similar manner to Wylie’s description of the concept of landscape, nature is not solely constructed by the viewer, nor is it singly responsible for our response to it, rather both exceed each other becoming just as precariously intertwined as the exact spot a tourist would have to find themselves in in order to experience the sublime. In this sense the 18th century has much to offer those environmental theorists debating the competing narratives surrounding embodiment and detachment as they relate to both environmental appreciation and landscape practices. The instability discussed by the period
mirror the same anxieties we face when attempting to negotiate between experiential
frameworks. Perhaps our inability to reconcile the two is what makes our relationship with
natural spaces so potent.

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