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Terryl L. Givens and Anthony P. Russell

Speaking of the painted screams of the artist Francis Bacon, Arthur Danto writes:

> These depicted screams seem to entitle us to some inference that they at least express an attitude of despair or outrage or condemnation, and that in the medium of extreme gesture the artist is registering a moral view toward the conditions that account for scream upon scream upon scream. How profoundly disillusioning it is then to read the artist saying, in a famous interview . . . , "I've always hoped in a sense to be able to paint the mouth like Monet painted a sunset." As if, standing before one of these canvases, Bacon were to say, "Well, there, I think, I very nearly got a screaming mouth as it should be painted. Damned hard to do." . . . To paint a scream because it is a difficult thing to paint, where the difficulty is not at all emotional but technical, like doing a figure in extreme foreshortening or capturing the evanescent pinks of sunrise over misting water, is really a form of perversion.
>
> As a perversion, it marks this strange artist's entire corpus. It is like a rack maker who listens to the screams of the racked only as evidence that he has done a fine job. It is inhuman. As humans, however, we cannot be indifferent to screams. We are accordingly victims ourselves, manipulated in our moral being by an art that has no such being, though it looks as if it must. It is for this reason that I hate Bacon's art.[1]

Before resuming his account of Margaret's tragic sufferings in the second half of Book I of Wordsworth's *Excursion*, the Wanderer echoes Danto's reaction to Bacon's "perverse" aestheticism by considering the disturbing possibility that his own narrative is merely a vehicle of aesthetic pleasure:

> It were a wantonness, and would demand

> Severe reproof, if we were men whose hearts
> Could hold vain dalliance with the misery
> Even of the dead; contented thence to draw
> A momentary pleasure, never marked
> By reason, barren of all future good. (626-31)[2]

Both Danto and the Wanderer raise a problematic issue. What are the moral implications of using human suffering as the stuff of aesthetic creation and pleasure? The necessary objectification of human experience out of which a work of art is formed seems particularly troubling when the experience in question is pain. Both Danto and the Wanderer can only justify aesthetic depictions of human misery if they serve a morally uplifting function. Representations of suffering must either register personal outrage and condemnation of its causes or, as the Wanderer puts it, must motivate "thoughts . . . to virtue friendly" (634).

And yet it is difficult to see how the inclusion of a morally edifying "attitude" in the work of art dispenses with our original qualms, since providing aesthetic pleasure remains nonetheless a central function of the object of art. As Dylan Thomas implies in "Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London," moral edification can simply become another poetic trope, however emotionally satisfying. "Never," he writes,

> Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound
> Or sow my salt seed
> In the least valley of sackcloth to mourn
> The majesty and burning of the child's death.
> I shall not murder
> The mankind of her going with a grave truth
> Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
> With any further
> Elegy of innocence and youth. (10-18)

However uplifting the elegist's intentions may be, Thomas suggests, the assimilation of death and suffering into a language of formal structures and grim puns about "grave" truths is a kind of blasphemy no better than Bacon's studied dispassion. The perversely parasitic relationship between art and human anguish ultimately cannot be concealed by the inclusion of moral consolation in the former. Such consolation may well be little more than an anaesthetic permitting our indulgence in the aesthetic. This essay examines two poems depicting human anguish in order to explore a current in Romantic thought that implicitly yields some original and compelling insights regarding the problematic relationship between art and suffer-

ing. The focus is primarily on Wordsworth's narrative of Margaret's suffering in *The Excursion*, then more briefly on Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. In both cases Kant's ideas about the sublime provide us with a useful perspective from which to understand the issues these poems raise.

Wordsworth's self-conscious engagement with the question of art and suffering in Book I of *The Excursion* is perhaps the most sustained from the Romantic period.[3] Indeed, Wordsworth's frequent and often radical revisions of this poem, originally known as "The Ruined Cottage," from 1797-98 to 1845, reveal that the representation of human anguish was a persistent concern throughout his life. The poem, as James Butler has demonstrated in his brilliant reconstruction of its various redactions, was originally "a powerful representation of domestic tragedy, stark in its bare essentials" (14). Subsequent versions, however, backed away from this unmediated display of human misery, reflecting Wordsworth's increasing sense that such suffering had somehow to be made explicitly meaningful to prevent its becoming the occasion for a "momentary pleasure." In MS. B (1798), Wordsworth added the moralizing transition between Parts I and II quoted above, and introduced Margaret's tale with a philosophical biography of the Pedlar (known in the *Excursion* as the Wanderer), describing his intuitive sense of the enduring harmony underlying nature (Butler 10).[4] These additions provided the groundwork for the reader's proper response to the woman's travails. Consolation is to be found, the poem now suggested, in the fact that Margaret's life and death are part of a coherent "total pattern" in nature (Wordsworth, *Music of Humanity* 147). In MS. D (1799), Wordsworth removed the Pedlar's history but added a concluding passage in which the interlocutor is admonished not to react with despair to the tale he has heard. A more enlightened outlook on nature, the Pedlar advises, reveals that "what we feel of sorrow and despair / From ruin and from change" is only an "idle dream" (Butler 75).

The more Wordsworth reworked this poem, the more he seemed to feel the need to soften the impact of Margaret's sufferings. The title itself of MS. E (1803-4), "The Pedlar," betrays the poet's changed emphasis on consolation. "The Pedlar" includes the moral transition from MS. B, the consoling reflections with which MS. D closes, and a much expanded history of the Pedlar preceding Margaret's story. This poem, which eventually became the first book of *The Excursion*, delineates even more clearly than in previous versions the metaphysical concept of the One Life which is at the basis of Wordsworth's vision of moral consolation.[5] For example, Wordsworth informs us that the Pedlar's education at the hands of nature led to his serene awareness that "All things . . . breathed immor-

tality" (Butler 400). The inner peace derived from this "Sublime and comprehensive" perspective (400), the poet claims, allowed the Pedlar "to suffer / With them whom he saw suffer" without succumbing to despair (410). Eventually, however, even this Coleridgean philosophical containment of human misery must have seemed insufficient to Wordsworth. In the 1845 and 1849-50 versions of *The Excursion*, he further reinforced the moral framework of this tale by incorporating Christian sources of consolation as well. The Pedlar—now named the Wanderer—tells his grieving companion that it is to the Cross that one must ultimately turn for consolation that "springs, / From sources deeper far than deepest pain, / For the meek Sufferer" (*PW* 938-39).

Wordsworth's commitment to providing an edifying moral through his representation of Margaret's anguish is most startlingly conveyed in a line from *The Excursion*'s conclusion that was retained in all versions of this narrative after 1798. The line in question appears at the end of a passage describing the Wanderer's reflections upon passing by the ruined cottage, with its overgrown vegetation, in the aftermath of Margaret's death:

> I well remember that those very plumes,
> Those weeds, and the high spear-grass on that wall,
> By mist and silent rain-drops silvered o'er,
> As once I passed, into my heart conveyed
> So still an image of tranquillity,
> So calm and still, and looked so beautiful
> Amid the uneasy thoughts that filled my mind,
> That what we feel of sorrow and despair
> From ruin and from change, and all the grief
> That passing shows of Being leave behind,
> Appeared an idle dream, that could maintain,
> Nowhere, dominion o'er the enlightened spirit
> Whose meditative sympathies repose
> Upon the breast of Faith. I turned away,
> And walked along my road in happiness. (*PW* 942-56)

One is tempted to speculate that Wordsworth's visions and revisions of the "Ruined Cottage" from 1799 onward constituted so many attempts to create a poem that could bear the weight of the last verse of this passage. Indeed, this line focuses almost unbearably the challenge that the poem as a whole undertakes. Its justification for representing Margaret's suffering depends on a reader's willingness to embrace its metaphysics of consolation. With a rather chilling logic, Wordsworth suggests in this line that if this consoling vision is truly embraced, human suffering must necessarily

become an occasion for happiness.[6]

The very fact that this verse startles, of course, betrays Wordsworth's failure to convince us of its appropriateness. There is something disturbingly smug and self-serving in the Wanderer's ability to walk on not in sadness or reflection, but in happiness. Indeed, it is perhaps revealing that though the many accretions to the original "Ruined Cottage" were meant to provide an audience with more than a "momentary pleasure" artfully crafted out of human suffering, the final version of this poem, completed forty-eight years later, climaxes with an experience of aesthetic pleasure. The stages in Margaret's tragic decline, we recall, are poignantly embodied by the steady, irresistible encroachment of post-lapsarian chaos upon the small Eden of the cottage. On one of his last visits to Margaret's hut, the Wanderer enters the garden and sees "More plainly still,"

> that poverty and grief
> Were now come nearer to her: weeds defaced
> The hardened soil, and knots of withered grass:
> No ridges there appeared of clear black mould,
> No winter greenness; of her herbs and flowers,
> It seemed the better part were gnawed away
> Or trampled into earth . . . (833-39)

It is this same scene of desolation and disrepair—"silvered o'er" by rain (944)—that the Wanderer will later describe as conveying "an image of tranquillity" so beautiful that it constitutes a manifestation of profound metaphysical truths from whose perspective human misery can be seen as ephemeral, inconsequential (946). The Wanderer's happiness, it would seem, depends ultimately on an aestheticization of the scene of Margaret's suffering. Reified by the rain's silver patina into an object of beauty, the garden masks the ugly reality of Margaret's anguish. To what degree, we may ask, does the metaphysics of consolation in this poem perform a similar function to that of the rain?[7]

In this context, it is instructive to recall the facts of Margaret's story. They include blight, hunger, illness, death, dissolution, wretchedness, and more death. The motifs, significantly, are ones that reinforce the theme of futility: "the *useless* fragments of a wooden bowl," (an objective correlative that portends and epitomizes the entire story); the inevitable decay of the cottage as a consequence of Margaret's negligence; her "unutterably helpless" grief (656); the "little power" the Wanderer has to comfort her (683); the "helpless" infant who is finally "self-stilled" in the presence of an even more agonizingly helpless mother (737).

The cumulative effect of such a litany of futility is the total failure of human action and human understanding alike in the face of insurmountable misery. Indeed, nothing in the Wanderer's tale justifies his later claim that, "in her worst distress," Margaret "had ofttimes felt / The unbounded might of prayer," or that she had patiently endured her anguish "with soul / fixed on the Cross" (935-37). In point of fact, what is most affecting about Margaret's story is not the extent of her losses—"'Tis a common tale," after all, of "ordinary sorrow" (637-38)—rather, it is Margaret's inability to recover from her grief that is most tragic. Wordsworth even hints at the fact that her infant essentially died of neglect.[8] God never in fact grants her the "patience to endure" that she hopes for in her one and only reference to a transcendent source of consolation (775). In Wordsworth's poetry, Jonathan Wordsworth notes, "the love of God is frequently no blessing" (251), and indeed the Wanderer's exhortation to Margaret to trust in His "good love" (808) is undercut by his earlier admission that her husband's disappearance is ultimately attributable to the fact that "it pleased Heaven" to bring on the "plague of war" (538, 539). Margaret's reaction to the Wanderer's moral exhortation—"but for my hope / it seemed she did not thank me"—betrays the extent of her despair (812-13). The reality is that Margaret spent nine years waiting expectantly for a husband who never returned, for succor that never came, and ceased the cycle of vain hope and frustrated faith when death, not peace, overcame her. Nine years, we are told, of "heart wasting"—a crucial and excruciating expression (875). In this context, the Wanderer's attempts to make of Margaret an emblem of patient Christian long-suffering are dismally deficient. References to faith, the Cross, and the "unbounded might of prayer" seem to gloss over, with a cold silver sheen, a darker truth (936). From this perspective, that is, Wordsworth's morally edifying poem desensitizes us to human suffering—transforms it into a hollow source of self-serving pleasure no different, in essence, from purely aesthetic pleasure.[9]

The troubling inconsistencies between the facts of Margaret's story and the Wanderer's assessment of its meaning suggest a reading of this poem contradicting the traditional view that it presents a vision of moral and metaphysical consolation based on a confluence of ideas about the One Life and Christian revelation. Indeed, by emphasizing these inconsistencies it would almost appear that the poem's real agenda is precisely to point out the inefficacy or inadequacy of theodicy as a basis for reconciliation to human suffering. In point of fact, Wordsworth's poem allows for a third reading that eschews the disadvantageous extremes of these two alternatives. Such a reading requires us to examine Wordsworth's poem

in light of Kantian conceptions of morality and the sublime. What connects Wordsworth's poem to these conceptions is the element of failure that is central to the grammar or structure of the sublime as articulated by Kant. Theresa Kelly, in "Wordsworth, Kant, and the Romantic Sublime," neatly summarizes Kant's concept of the sublime as follows:

> The mind discovers the sublime as the imagination attempts to encompass nature's magnitude (the 'mathematically sublime') or to resist its might (the 'dynamical sublime'). The imagination fails in this attempt, but reason recognizes in this failure a power . . . which surpasses [both] nature and sense experience. (132)

The recognition of the power of reason constitutes our experience of the sublime. It will be useful here to focus more specifically on Kant's treatment of the dynamical sublime. Nature, Kant summarizes, is dynamically sublime if it is considered as might that is sufficient to excite fear in us, yet might without dominion over us. Nature evokes fear, to be more specific, "if we judge it in such a way that we merely *think* of the case where we might possibly want to put up resistance against it, and that any resistance would in that case be utterly futile" (*Judgment* 119). In other words, fear or terror enters the picture when we see a force of nature as irresistible and ourselves as correspondingly impotent. As in the mathematical sublime, which entails a defeat of our faculties of representation,

> in the same way, though the irresistibility of nature's might makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical impotence, it reveals in us at the same time an ability to judge ourselves independent of nature, and reveals in us a superiority over nature that is the basis of a self-preservation quite different in kind. . . . It calls forth our strength (which does not belong to nature [within us]) to regard as small the [objects] of our [natural concerns] . . ., and because of this we regard nature's might . . . as yet not having dominance over us, as persons, that we should have to bow down to it . . . Hence nature is called sublime [*erhaben*] merely because it elevates [*erhebt*] our imagination, [making] it exhibit those cases where the mind can come to feel its own sublimity, which lies in its vocation and elevates it even above nature. (*Judgment* 120-21)

To summarize, then, there are three essential constituents of the dynamical sublime: 1) the object or phenomenon before us must be a source of fear. It must threaten to overwhelm, destroy, annihilate, or engulf us. 2) It must be of such irresistible might as to reveal our total and utter helplessness. 3) It therefore calls forth our power to "regard" such helpless-

ness as of no consequence. This power to regard, to present to ourselves, as it were, our own defeat as insignificant, becomes a triumph that more than compensates for any mere physical defeat.

This triumph, moreover, is fundamentally a triumph of our moral being. As Paul Crowther and others have recognized, Kant's concept of the sublime is intimately bound up with his analysis of morality. For Kant, we may recall, true moral virtue derives from the will's enactment of universal moral laws *internally* prescribed by reason. Virtuous behavior is only possible if fueled by the will's absolute freedom from external determination, insofar as "the moral law reveals to me a life independent of animality and even of the entire world of the senses" (*Practical Reason* 5:161-62). That is, moral action

> is concerned, not with the matter of the action and its presumed results, but with its form and with the principle from which it follows: and what is essentially good in the action consists in the mental disposition, let the consequences be what they may. (*Groundwork* 84)

Insofar as the experience of the dynamical sublime yields a recognition of the autonomy of reason from sensible externals, it is an experience that belongs to the moral domain. As Crowther points out, sublimity, for Kant, "is a predicate ascribed to wills determined by the moral law, that is wills that have transcended determination by any natural impulse" (20). Indeed, the point that is not sufficiently made in discussions of the Kantian sublime is that the triumph of reason is an affirmation of man's *moral* autonomy. The experience of the sublime discloses the will's absolute freedom and therefore the privileged status of human beings as moral agents in the fullest sense.

It is crucial, at this point, to clarify what Kant means when he defines morality in terms of the will's transcendence of "natural impulse" or of "the entire world of the senses." Moral action cannot in any way be determined by *personal* interests or inclinations, since this would presuppose an external, contingent motivation for such action. Most remarkably, perhaps, Kant's emphasis on moral autonomy leads to the inevitable conclusion that morality must be entirely independent of religious belief:

> Is it good to be virtuous only because there is another world, or will not actions be rewarded rather because they were good and virtuous in themselves? Does man's heart not contain immediate moral precepts, and is it absolutely necessary to fix our machinery to the other world for the sake of moving man here according to his destiny? (*Dreams* 120)

For Kant, as Crowther explains, "to do one's duty on the expectation of being rewarded by immortality is to make morality subservient to the natural end of the desire for everlasting happiness" (113).

From this vantage, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the failure or defeat of metaphysical sources of meaning would constitute for Kant the starkest epitome of all other situations potentially yielding an experience of the sublime. As Kant observes, "the only way we can judge a superiority over obstacles is by the magnitude of the resistance" (*Judgment* 119). Therefore, insofar as the degree of sublimity experienced in any given situation is dependent upon and proportional to our sense of failure or helplessness, the deconstruction of metaphysical belief must be accounted as a potential catalyst of the highest sublimity. Though Kant does not directly address this configuration in his discussions of the sublime, one may suggest, that is, that a defeat of metaphysical understanding (in a sense, of theoretical reason) is an event analogous to the defeat of the imaginative powers or of the physical self which he identifies with the mathematical and the dynamical sublime, respectively.[10] As in these two versions of the sublime, the defeat of metaphysical constructs requires us "to discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of quite a different kind, and which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for nature's seeming omnipotence" (*Judgment* 120). In this case, "nature's seeming omnipotence" takes the form of the universe's titanic incomprehensibility.

It may be useful, in this context, to define the latter experience as the "ethical sublime," since to confront the world as inscrutable is to perceive it as essentially amoral.[11] As we have seen, moreover, the failure of metaphysical knowledge is crucial to Kant's analysis of morality. Knowledge must make room for faith, as Richard Kroner puts it, "not primarily for the sake of faith but in order to make room for the will" (53). In other words, some vacancy or lacuna in the episteme is the necessary precondition for a Kantian construction of the moral self. The full articulation of metaphysical realities, for Kant, forestalls the launching of the self into a project whose direction and shape and meaning are fully non-contingent and therefore free from the epistemological constructs that would otherwise condition and direct moral agency, thus precluding absolute freedom and authentic self-definition. The term "ethical sublime," then, is a condition implicitly suggested by Kant. It is a condition that evokes or beckons forth an exercise of the moral will by precipitating a particular kind of crisis. Just as, in the mathematical sublime, it is the failure of the faculty of representation that magnifies the victorious impulse of practical reason,

and just as in the dynamical sublime, more particularly, it is precisely the impossibility of supremacy over the awesome force of nature that dramatizes the superiority of man's moral nature, even so is it in the frustration of the human yearning for theodicy, for rational understanding of an incomprehensibly tragic universe, that "room for the will" is greatest, and affirmation in a metaphysical and epistemological vacuum becomes an ethically sublime gesture (Kroner 53).

Approaching Wordsworth's "The Ruined Cottage" from the standpoint of the Kantian sublime, and in particular the ethical sublime, yields some useful insights that potentially resolve the antithetical readings which the poem initially produced. It is clear, first of all, that from a Kantian perspective the Wanderer's accommodation of Margaret's suffering to Christian theodicy and the One Life entails a surrender of moral autonomy. The Wanderer can preserve his happiness or serenity in the face of tragedy only by reference to a reality outside himself. Only his belief in the immortality of the soul, or in the mind's "endless allness,"[12] makes him able to "*afford* to suffer / with those whom he saw suffer" (370-71). The Wanderer's concluding appeal to the beautiful, in this context, is particularly instructive. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant contrasts the beautiful and the sublime in ways which echo the distinction between the presence and absence of theodicy. The beautiful, according to Kant, is the feeling of pleasure in the harmonious interplay of faculties (reason and imagination) to which the formal qualities of an object give rise (44, 151). Though the pleasure of the beautiful cannot be experienced by reference to a particular concept, it does involve an intuitive perception that the object has a "form of finality," that is, "an appearance of design which is able . . . to stimulate the co-operation of the faculties in a way that promotes the ends of cognition generally" (Crowther 59). In other words, to experience the beautiful is to sense the world as ordered and thus ultimately knowable. As Barnouw puts it, "Beauty . . . characterizes perceptions of a world in which we can cope and are at home" (504). In this sense, one might argue that the perception of beauty parallels the experience of metaphysical certitude, even if in the former case the grounds of such certitude cannot be named. Barnouw confirms this insight by contrasting the Kantian beautiful and sublime in terms of their relationship to moral autonomy:

> For Kant the harmony which beauty reflects or suggests in the workings of our mental powers, in their relations to the external world, and in that world taken as a whole . . . is ultimately in conflict with the nature and the recognition of human freedom as autonomy. The experience of the sublime is meant to disrupt and transcend harmonious interaction at all levels. It should throw us

back on an awareness of our rational selfhood as incommensurable to, and never to find adequate realization in, whatever is empirical in ourselves and our world. (506)

Insofar as the experience of beauty is characterized by the feeling that nature is suited to human cognition, it implicitly suggests that we inhabit a coherent universe. If motivated by a sense of beauty, therefore, moral action may be interpreted as the consequence of a self-interested desire to participate in some kind of universal harmony. Moral autonomy is sacrificed insofar as human conduct is externally motivated by the desire for happiness achieved through what Wordsworth defines as the mind's experience of "intense unity" (*Prose Works* 2:354). The beautiful in nature, that is, guides us to "a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused" ("Tintern Abbey" 95-96). Wordsworth's use of the term "sublime" in that poem is obviously closer to Kant's conception of beauty than to his conception of the sublime.[13] And indeed it is the *beauty* of the "silvered o'er" weeds that conveys to the Wanderer a vision of harmony which reveals the disjunctions of "sorrow and despair" as ephemeral. It is not surprising therefore, to discover in Wordsworth's preface to *The Excursion* a passage that closely echoes Kant's definition of the beautiful: "My voice proclaims," the poet confidently asserts, "How exquisitely the individual Mind . . . to the external World / Is fitted: —and how exquisitely, too . . The external World is fitted to the Mind" (62-63, 66-68).

As we have seen, however, this fit is unconvincingly delineated in Book I of *The Excursion*. The Wanderer's morally edifying employment of metaphysical sources of consolation does not succeed in persuading us that Margaret's suffering was somehow redemptive. His concluding appeal to the beauty of the ruined cottage betrays the self-serving nature of his response to tragedy. The description of the cottage in this case betrays the subordination of metaphysical incoherence to the beautiful, and therefore of the will to "a momentary pleasure." From a Kantian perspective, that is, the Wanderer's moralizing reaction to Margaret's anguish simply manifests the servitude of his will to what the philosopher defines as the "natural impulse" for happiness. Wordsworth's persistent revisions of the poem, granting an ever more prominent place to the Wanderer, reflect the compelling force of such an impulse.

Of course, by acknowledging, however unintentionally, the ethical problems inherent in the Wanderer's response, Wordsworth's poem also forces the reader to seek alternatives to this response. Such an alternative is in fact articulated briefly but movingly by the poem's speaker, the Wanderer's interlocutor. It is worth recalling, in this context, that the Wanderer's

concluding comments are an admonition against what he perceives to be the speaker's excessive grief upon hearing the tale of Margaret's suffering. Few readers have noted, however, that the Wanderer offers his advice as a consequence of his *misreading* of the speaker's sorrow. The Wanderer assumes that his interlocutor has surrendered to despair, whereas this is clearly not the case. Here is the speaker's reaction at the conclusion of Margaret's story:

> The old Man ceased: he saw that I was moved;
> From that low bench, rising instinctively
> I turned aside in weakness, nor had power
> To thank him for the tale which he had told.
> I stood, and leaning o'er the garden wall
> Reviewed that Woman's sufferings; and it seemed
> To comfort me while with a brother's love
> I blessed her in the impotence of grief. (917-24)

Here, in the speaker's immediate reaction, is an example of what we have defined as Kant's ethical sublime. Margaret's tragic sufferings, her empty and "torturing hope," her gradual and irreversible ruin, her self-destructive despair, are too overwhelming to be somehow contained or sanitized. Confronted by such misery, the speaker momentarily assumes Margaret's own helplessness—her inability to find, in the face of suffering, the inner peace or consolation which the Wanderer will subsequently attribute to her. The loss of will that characterizes despair is strikingly conveyed by the speaker's almost involuntary movement from the bench, and his turning aside, "in weakness," from the desolation of human anguish. And yet, at the apex of the total collapse of consolation or understanding—a collapse which threatens a paralysis of the will—the speaker's gesture that redeems his "weakness" is specifically and emphatically grounded in the absolute recognition of this failure: "I blessed her in the *impotence* of grief" (924). The impact of this gesture, that is, lies in the fact that the speaker's blessing, a religious signifier, is delivered precisely at the moment when this signifier is implicitly acknowledged as totally inefficacious.

Wordsworth delineates, in this brief moment, a response to human suffering that eschews the loss of autonomy implicit in both Margaret's despair and the Wanderer's self-serving appeal to metaphysical sources of consolation. The speaker's blessing, bereft of its metaphysical supports, is a pure act of the will asserting itself in an existential void. It is this gesture that permits him to contemplate, "with an interest more mild,"

That secret spirit of humanity
Which, 'mid the calm oblivious tendencies
Of nature, 'mid her plants, and weeds, and flowers,
And silent overgrowings, still survived. (926-30)

Unlike the Wanderer, his interlocutor does not aestheticize the ruined cottage; it remains a tragic reminder of nature's obliviousness to the human desire for coherence and meaning. However, the speaker's blessing denies to nature dominion over the will. It rejects a self-destructive fall into despair, and in so doing affirms our capacity to retain our humanity—defined by our autonomy—in the face of suffering.

It is difficult, of course, to prove that the ethical sublime as we have traced it in this poem was evoked by Wordsworth intentionally. Indeed, Wordsworth's own expressed admiration for the Wanderer would seem to argue against this possibility. "The character I have represented in his [the Wanderer's] person," he supposedly claimed, "is chiefly an idea of what I fancied my own character might have become in his own circumstances" (Butler 17). It is worth noting, however, that this statement also implicitly acknowledges the poet's difference from the Wanderer, and indeed, it is the Wanderer's interlocutor who is identified as the author in the "argument" of *The Excursion.* Coleridge's own disappointment with *The Excursion*, moreover, as failing to embody what he had hoped would be "the FIRST GENUINE PHILOSOPHIC POEM," suggests that he sensed Wordsworth's inability to impose convincingly onto his poem the Wanderer's point of view."[14] The causes of this inability are perhaps revealed most poignantly in a letter the poet wrote about his own experience of loss. Commenting on the death of his brother, Wordsworth observes,

A thousand times have I asked myself, as your tender sympathy led me to do, "why was he taken away?" and I have answered the question as you have done. In fact there is no other answer that can satisfy and lay the mind at rest. Why have we a choice and a will, and a notion of justice and injustice, enabling us to be moral agents? Why have we sympathies that make the best of us so afraid of inflicting pain and sorrow, which yet we see dealt about so lavishly by the supreme governor? Why should our notions of right towards each other, and to all sentient beings within our influence, differ so widely from what appears to be His notion and rule, if everything were to end here? Would it not be blasphemy to say that, upon the supposition of the thinking principle being destroyed by death, however inferior we may be to the great Cause and Ruler of things, we have more of love in our nature than he has? The thought is monstrous; and yet how to get rid of it, except on the supposition of another and a better world, I do not see. (Selincourt 52)

Not unlike the Wanderer's concluding appeal to the "unbounded might of prayer," Wordsworth's "supposition of another and a better world" strikes us as wan by contrast with the powerful "blasphemy" that precedes it, defiantly celebrating man's moral will in the face of an immoral God. The "Elegiac Stanzas suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm," written in commemoration of his brother's death, in fact provides us with an instructive contrast to the concluding portion of the "Ruined Cottage." In the poem, Wordsworth recalls a time when, living near the castle during a stretch of beautiful weather, he had imagined himself painting an image of it much different from the tenebrous scene depicted by Sir George Beaumont. "If mine had been the Painter's hand," he writes,

> I would have painted thee, thou hoary Pile
> Amid a world how different from this!
> Beside a sea that could not cease to smile;
> On tranquil land, beneath a sky of bliss.
> Thou shouldst have seemed a treasure house divine
> Of peaceful years; a chronicle of heaven . . . (17-22)

The poet's imagined painting, conveying "silent Nature's breathing life," becomes an embodiment of theodicy (28). Beauty, that is, manifests the coherence of a universe underpinned by the divine. After his brother's death, however, Wordsworth acknowledges that this outlook was a "fond illusion" (29). "A deep distress," he writes, "hath humanized my soul," and the sign of Wordsworth's new found humanity is his inability to embrace the beautiful (36). Beaumont's vision of "this sea in anger, and that dismal shore," of "This rueful sky, this pageantry of fear," far more accurately portrays the universe which man inhabits (44, 48). In the last stanza of this poem, composed roughly at the same time as "The Pedlar," Wordsworth articulates a remarkably different response to suffering:

> Farewell, farewell the heart that lives alone,
> Housed in a dream, at distance from the Kind!
> Such happiness, wherever it be known,
> Is to be pitied; for 'tis surely blind. (53-56)

To see the world as the Wanderer does, though it may yield happiness, is to embrace an illusory vision that necessitates indifference to or detachment from our "Kind." Far more admirable is the sublimity that comes with recognizing the real ugliness of the world and yet confronting with "fortitude" the "frequent sights of what is to be borne" (57, 58). "Not

without hope we suffer and we mourn" (64) Wordsworth concludes, but like the speaker's blessing in "The Ruined Cottage," that hope simply embodies the will's refusal to despair; it does not, in other words, have a specific metaphysical referent. The radical questioning of the beautiful articulated explicitly in the "Elegiac Stanzas" and implicitly in "The Ruined Cottage," therefore, constitutes a warning against art's surrender to metaphysics. Indeed, through what we have defined as the ethical sublime, Wordsworth points to art's proper role in relation to human suffering. Like the speaker's blessing, aesthetic representation should assert the will's moral autonomy by functioning as a kind of prayer uttered in the *absence* of those transcendent referents that would normally sustain it. The failure of the Wanderer to reconcile us to the tragedy of Margaret, in other words, is the precondition for the story of the "Ruined Cottage" to succeed as poetry. By questioning the continuity of aesthetic form and metaphysical coherence, Wordsworth implicitly justifies the poetic representation of human misery only insofar as it enacts simultaneously art's inability to rationalize suffering and its capacity to refuse despair. To beget aesthetic form while acknowledging the shapelessness of the universe is, in Kantian terms, to achieve the ethical sublime. "Suffering," writes Wordsworth in an early version of *The Borderers*, "is permanent, obscure and dark, / And has the nature of infinity."[15] It is only by acknowledging this infinity that poetry fulfills a moral function.

The structure of the ethical sublime, as it has been traced in Wordsworth, may prove useful in shedding additional light on the frequently troubled relationship of so many Romantic poets to Christian mythology. From the perspective outlined here, the antagonisms to such mythology may occasionally turn out to be not so much a question of a perceived failure of Christian institutions per se, but of the intrusion by Christian theodicy into the sublime space of moral autonomy. The same Kantian grammar of failure is evident in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound.* Prometheus, of course, is here depicted as the very embodiment of the principle of suffering, stretched to its furthest boundaries of representation. In a remarkable blend of both incarnation and spectatorship, he is alternately the suffering Christ, whose agony approaches the infinite and the eternal, and the unspeakably tormented Mary, whose distress comes from her position as privileged yet impotent observer of her loved one's agonies. The curtain rises on a Prometheus who has been suffering thousands of years of vividly described bodily and psychological torture, but we sense that his knowledge of its redemptive value makes it bearable. In his own immodest words, his "agony [was] the barrier to [the] else all-conquering foe"

(119-20). Only *he* has not bent the knee, keeping alive the hope and possibility of moral freedom in the face of Jupiter's universal tyranny. In addition, his suffering is made tolerable by the Byronic self-possession he exhibits throughout. "Yet am I king over myself," he reminds us, "and rule the torturing and conflicting throngs within" (11. 492-93). In point of fact, there is nothing unique or sublime in the same kind of magnificent petulance any stubborn child or bullied schoolboy can endure in the name of pride or a fetishized self. If this were the extent of Shelley's portrait of moral triumph, it would ring as clichéd, as overblown, and as smugly self-indulgent as Byronic heroism often seems to be. Indeed, there are any number of Romantic "apostles of affliction," from Mackenzie through Chateaubriand's René to Heathcliff and beyond, who see in extremes of human suffering a ready calculus for the grandeur of the heroic soul. In these cases, a metaphysics of the self, so to speak, simply replaces more traditional sources of consolation.

That is why Prometheus' transition to observer rather than endurer of suffering necessarily moves us into a different set of considerations altogether. The shift is as unanticipated by Prometheus as it is unsettling. "Tear the veil," his tormentor commands, and the scene of the crucifixion is suddenly revealed. At first, it would seem that to invoke the specter of the suffering Christ might serve to confirm Prometheus's heroic sense of self and to ratify the redemptive value of his anguish. The suffering in both cases, to put it plainly, has meaning; it has purpose. In fact, to point to the atonement, in the larger context of a discussion of human suffering, is to suggest a paradigmatic instance of the anguish of innocence as profoundly meaningful. It is to suggest an archetypal theodicy—an emblem of the apparently random, needless, incomprehensible suffering of humankind that is miraculously endowed by mysterious theological or metaphysical realities with value beyond our reckoning. But in Shelley's vision, this archetypal atonement is a grand failure. And that failure can be said to represent the failure of theodicy itself, for the Furies reveal to Prometheus that Christ's sacrifice has tragically provoked not reconciliation but conflict.

In contrast to the God of Milton and of Goethe, whose adversary wills Evil but always effects the Good, we now have a perverse cosmic parody. Shelley's Savior is one who promises to redeem suffering by turning evil to good, only to find the result of his intervention is that "all best things are thus confused to ill" (628). Religion, the history of mankind here reveals, has served to intensify rather than to extinguish the flames of hate and conflict. The flames of war that engulf the world, the "sights too foul

to speak and live," are therefore an index, not of human depravity alone, but of the defeat of God himself and his moral order. The supreme sacrifice, the suffering intended to validate all human suffering, has been rendered hopelessly futile, and the possibility of salvation from our helplessness has been irrefutably denied us. As Prometheus makes the transition from re-figuring the suffering of the innocent Christ to helplessly observing it, and recognizing its lack of efficacy, he is overwhelmed, begging his persecutor to "remit the anguish of that [Christ's] lighted stare" (597). The very Name with power to save has instead, Prometheus acknowledges, "become a curse" (604). In the Kantian grammar, not only metaphysical certitude, but the very possibility of metaphysical consolation has been annihilated. It is at this point that Prometheus' final words, in acknowledging the total defeat of theodicy, reveal at the same time the triumph that can come only on the ruins of such a failure.[16] "Thy words are like a cloud of winged snakes," he tells the Fury, "and yet I pity those they torture not" (632-33).

At the very point when Prometheus acknowledges the utter failure of Christ's sacrifice, and, by association, of his own, the Fury recognizes she has witnessed a more impressive triumph, a triumph suggestive of the impotent blessing bestowed upon Margaret, and she retreats from the field. "Thou pitiest them?" she asks incredulously. "I speak no more" (634). It is precisely at the moment of Prometheus' concession of defeat, of the utter futility of redemptive meaning, that futility becomes the very ground of his incontestable moral supremacy. *What* Prometheus pities may be in part simply the inability of the wicked to respond with appropriate moral outrage to the evil presented to his eyes. But there is clearly more to it than this, for there would be nothing astonishing or incomprehensible to the Fury if Prometheus merely felt sorry for the stony hearted. Besides, if only the capacity for pity were at issue here, the entire Christ episode would have been unnecessary as a prelude to Prometheus' sublime gesture. But it is in the aftermath of the failure of compassion and the collapse of theodicy that this pity is manifested, and this pity thus becomes a moral gesture with vastly modified significance—significance, in Kant's words, "quite different in kind" (*Judgment* 121).

The pity, the compassion, the outraged moral sensibility, have all been denied their metaphysical referent. There can no longer be any transcendent meaning or value in such a pity. And with no meaning or value left to assail (and the Promethean will not only intact but now purified of any metaphysical motive)—flight is all that is left to the Fury. For Kant, as we have seen, virtue that exists by reference to a metaphysical principle does

not manifest the end of human existence, which is freedom or moral autonomy (Crowther 45). It is this end which Prometheus achieves in acknowledging the inefficacy of Christian theodicy while yet reaffirming his "imitatio Christi." Although the Prometheus who bleeds from his feet and hands is clearly meant to invoke Christian atonement as a myth of selfless benevolence that endows suffering with meaning, it is the shattering of that myth that creates the ruins necessary for his morally sublime gesture. As in the Wanderer's "impotent blessing," this sacrifice is a religious gesture without a religious referent.[17]

One temptation Shelley offers us is that, in the words of one critic, "the ideological drift of *Prometheus Unbound* may seem evident" (O'Neill 92). Thus the dramatic role of love, the nonviolent unseating of Jupiter, "tyrant of the world," that occurs in Act III, and the poetic Utopia of Act IV, combine to endow the poem in the eyes of most readers with its value as political and philosophical allegory.[18] But such a reading may miss the importance of those developments as occurring upon the ruins of the failure we have just witnessed. In such a context, subsequent gestures of millennial jubilee should not be seen—or seen only—as the politics of a poet functioning as "unacknowledged legislator." This would be to simplify Jupiter's collapse as a merely historical event, and everything that follows as secular eschatology.[19] But in the aftermath of theodicy's collapse, there is no history—only chaos. And in the refusal to acquiesce to this chaos, Shelley's gesture of utopian creation has become, like Wordsworth's blessing, aesthetic in an intensely moral way. We are reminded here of Kant's insistence that the sublime "is an emotion, and so it seems to be seriousness, rather than play, in the imagination's activity" (*Judgment* 98).

The subjecting of Christian theodicy to such obliteration as we have seen at Shelley's hand need not be construed as an anti-Christian gesture; certainly the purposes such an edifice served, if only by its obliteration, are conducive of what Kant considers the moral victory that matters most. More than half a century after Shelley, Dostoevsky would echo the most sublime gesture of *The Excursion*'s narrator and of Prometheus, in a setting that seems almost calculated to prove that the ethical sublime can transcend a Christian frame of reference without wounding it. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan elicits from Alyosha, at grievous cost, the young priest's confession that he cannot countenance that moral universe to which he has devoted his life:

> "Tell me frankly, I appeal to you—answer me: imagine that it is you yourself who are erecting the edifice of human destiny with the aim of making men

> happy in the end, of giving them peace and contentment at last, but to do that it is absolutely necessary, and indeed quite inevitable, to torture to death only one tiny creature . . . Would you consent to be the architect of those conditions? Tell me and do not lie!"
> "No, I wouldn't," Alyosha said softly. (287)

Moments later, of course, follows the tale of the Grand Inquisitor, in which Christ kisses his captor who has just condemned him to the stake. At the story's conclusion, Alyosha's final gesture is to kiss his heretical brother on the lips. "Plagiarism!," cries Ivan, but he has misunderstood (309), for the prisoner of the Grand Inquisitor kissed his accuser as gesture of forgiveness, and as an emblem of the ideal he personified. But Alyosha's kiss, like the blessing of Margaret and Prometheus' pity, follows upon the ruins of a moral order that has failed him. It is art, but it is not plagiarism.

Notes

1. Arthur Danto, "Francis Bacon," *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), 100-1.

2. Except where otherwise specified, all quotations of Wordsworth's poetry will be from *Poetical Works*. In this edition, *The Excursion* is based on the 1849-50 text.

3. For different approaches to Wordsworth and the problem of human suffering, see studies by James H. Averill, David Gervais, and Karen Swann.

4. Manuscript citations are from the reading texts that Butler provides in his study.

5. As is well known, Wordsworth's notion of the underlying unity of all things in nature was heavily influenced by Coleridge. See, for example, the latter's "Religious Musings":

> 'Tis the sublime of man,
> Our noontide Majesty, to know ourselves
> Parts and proportions of one wond'rous whole:
> This fraternizes man, this constitutes
> Our charities and bearings. But 'tis God
> Diffus'd thro' all, that doth make all one whole. (127-31)

or "The Eolian Harp":

> O the one life within us and abroad,
> Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
> A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
> Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where— (25-28)

Butler quotes a verse from one of the working manuscripts of "The Ruined

Cottage"—which does not appear in the reading texts he compiled—that clearly suggests Coleridge's influence: "In all things he [the Pedlar] saw one life, and felt that it was joy" (16).

6. See, in this regard, Augustine's rather harsh judgment: "Only in the impossible event of good-will being malevolent, could a man who is truly and sincerely filled with pity desire that there should be miserable people for him to pity" (36).

7. Theresa M. Kelley traces in great detail Wordsworth's tendency to use the beautiful as the source of an "ethos of coherence" (*Revisionary Aesthetics* 145). Kelley, too, however, is unconvinced by the "aesthetics of containment" brought to bear in the Pedlar's speech at the end of "The Ruined Cottage."

8. From within
Her solitary infant cried aloud:
Then, like a blast that dies away self-stilled,
The voice was silent. (735-38)

9. The self-serving nature of the Wanderer's consoling vision has also been noted by Jonathan Barron and Kenneth R. Johnston, who argue that the Wanderer's narrative is fueled by his sense of guilt at failing to aid Margaret in her distress.

10. Indeed, one could argue that the failure of theodicy is implicit in both these versions of the sublime, insofar as they entail a recognition of incomprehensible magnitude or of insurmountable might that can only be resisted by recourse to out inner resources, and *not* by recourse to external metaphysical truths (i.e.: notions of the soul's immortality, etc.).

11. We are using the term "ethical" here in the same way that Kant uses the terms "mathematical" and "dynamical." Just as the magnitude of nature leads to the mind's recognition of its capacity to embrace the concept of infinity, and just as the power of nature provokes the mind's recognition of its ability to imagine resistance to such power, so the amorality of the universe leads to a recognition of the will's moral autonomy.

12. The expression is found in Thomas Allsop, *Letters, Conversations, and Recollections of S.T. Coleridge*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 1:97-99, and quoted in Thorpe 210.

13. In "Wordsworth, Kant, and the Romantic Sublime," Theresa Kelley usefully delineates the differences between Wordsworth's and Kant's conceptions of the sublime. Although for both sublime experience entails "the mind's apprehension of internal powers that cannot be accorded limit or adequate expression," Wordsworth, following Coleridge, articulated a "preference for a sublime that is free of the combat between reason's intellectual mastery and nature's magnitude or might which characterizes Kant's model." For Wordsworth and Coleridge, in fact, it is nature that leads the mind to "a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused": "the inner conflict and sense of possible hazard which permeate the Kantian sublime have no place in Wordsworth's discussion of the mind's experience of 'intense unity' with those objects which impress it with ideas of power and duration" (131-33). The distinction between Wordsworth's own

conceptions of the sublime and the beautiful traced by Kelley in *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics* is not relevant to the current discussion, since it is to Kant's conception of the beautiful that Wordsworth's sublime is being linked here. For a somewhat different reading that emphasizes the similarities between Kantian and Wordsworthian conceptions of the sublime, see Eve Walsh Stoddard. It should be clear, however, that our discussion does not rely on a demonstrable link between Kant and Wordsworth. Rather, we make use of the structure of the Kantian sublime as a critical tool which allows us to shed light on Wordsworth's complex engagement with suffering, art, and morality.

14. Quoted by Butler, 16. In his overview of *The Excursion*, William Howard also points out the crucial role of the speaker in resisting the Wanderer's subsumption of "human misery into the larger pattern of loss and consolation." Throughout *The Excursion*, according to Howard, Wordsworth explores through the figure of the narrator "the mind's resistance to the internal pressure of ontological revelation" (516).

15. Quoted in Jonathan Wordsworth, 59.

16. Stuart Sperry expresses a similar view in his claim that, "[Prometheus] does not survive through the power of faith, which at its strongest is closest to what Shelley most of all detested: 'the cold security of undoubted triumph' of the God of *Paradise Lost* and his absolute foreknowledge" (249).

17. O'Neill will even argue that the poem goes so far in the direction away from reference as to run the risk "of laying claim to an imaginative autonomy which is self-enclosed," asking to be read (here he cites Geoffrey Ward) "not as pointers towards external reality but as constituting reality itself"(92). Ward will in fact argue that "a fundamental poetic operation in *Prometheus Unbound* is the discharge of words out of their customary and singular nature into the area of proliferating, thence indeterminate, thence inexhaustible meaning" (202). Here we would insist that if the Kantian structure of failure tells us anything, it is that such a reading risks confusing the poem's status as an "impotent blessing" with some kind of naive solipsism or a simple play of signifiers.

18. Donald H. Reiman, to give but one typical example of this critical tendency, sees the Promethean ethic as informed by Shelley's perceptions of the French Revolution; he finds the drama's pivotal moment in the fifth scene of Act II, which "makes clear Asia's role as the personification of beauty and the goal of love, the anthropomorphic form of the abstract principle that, Shelley believed, underlies all the creativity of the universe" (62-64).

19. Ross G. Woodman agrees that critics have underestimated the "movement away from an allegory of time," and suggests that this shift is really toward apocalypse rather than millennium (170).

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