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“Borne back ceaselessly into the past”:

Iterations of the Sublime in William Wordsworth, Mary Shelley, and Virginia Woolf

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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Abstract

In William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, the respective poetic voices and characters struggle to grasp what it means to inhabit a "self" in the present as they retrospectively ruminate on their pasts, creating an unsteady "embedding" and churning in the text's narrative space. In order to gain a fuller reading of moments that this paper argues are sublime, this thesis will examine each writer's use of nesting techniques, striking imagery, and an elevated language of verticality, at the same time taking into consideration three of the main concepts of the sublime: those of affective ambivalence, transcendence or elevation, and subjective supersensibility. In mapping the theorizations of the three major critics of the sublime—Longinus, Edmund Burke, and Immanuel Kant—onto the texts of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Woolf, I will be crafting a methodology that combines the analytic language of the three critics with the creative terminology used by the writers in their own writings.

In Chapter 1, I introduce the main formulations of three major critics of the sublime and summarize the general progression of the concept of sublimity. I argue that the ways in which Wordsworth, Shelley, and Woolf embed the ambivalent act of retrospection in their texts recalls the movement of sublime affect between the sensible and supersensible.

In Chapter 2, I examine *The Prelude* as a work that can be read as an inherently Romantic creation for its elevation of the individual and analyze the ways in which Wordsworth uses landscape in the poem to expand his vision of the self. I also read Wordsworth's usage of "spots of time" as an example of a nesting technique that complicates the progression of time and narrative in a linear or chronological fashion.

In Chapter 3, I study the use of terrifying elements in *Frankenstein* and show how the artificial Romantic division between “Romantic” and “Gothic” literature helps to deepen a reading of the motifs that exemplify a decidedly Gothic sublime in Shelley’s text. I borrow from the Freudian notion of the “uncanny” and the Gothic motif of “the double” to present the text’s inability to transcend its embodied imagery as a struggle between the sensible and supersensible.

In Chapter 4, I read *The Waves* as a work of specifically modernist fiction and compare Woolf’s mathematically sublime vision of self and her writing style to the modernist experience of life in the city. Through comparing Woolf’s “moments of being” to the Wordsworthian “time spots” and to the epistolary construction of Shelley, I garner a reading within these texts that thematizes temporal haunting as a hallmark of the Romantic, Gothic, and modernist sublime.

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Chapter I: “What we call the beginning is often the end”:

An Introduction

The text *On the Sublime (Peri hypsous)*—dated to around the first century CE, and traditionally attributed to a Greek figure known as Longinus—is considered as the progenitor of the concept of the sublime and is responsible for a number of crucial elements that influence its critical theorization into the modern age.¹ This early conception of the sublime involves the quintessential elements of momentary transport and elevation, rendered by the skillful use of language. While Longinus’ theories were undoubtedly the blueprint for other theorists such as Burke and Kant, his critical concept existed on the fringes of the literary world until his text was translated into more accessible languages; it “aroused little critical interest until it was translated into French by Boileau in 1674.”² From there, theorists such as Edmund Burke considered the sublime in relation to the psychological states of wonder and terror and added to the critical vocabulary ideas of a simultaneous pain and delight. Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, published in 1757, advances some of the ideas explored by Longinus in his *Peri hypsous*, but also furthers theorizations about early psychological responses and the sublime. Signaling a change from the earlier sublime effect of Longinus and anticipating Kant’s aesthetic judgement of sublime experience, Burke defines the sublime as “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”³ Although a text might render an image or scene in a terrifying light, sublimity is located in the subject, not the object. Expanding upon Burke’s work, in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) Immanuel Kant adds a more refined, critical terminology into the mix, calling the struggle between the subjugating pain of overwhelming aspects of the sensible world and the pleasure in recognition of a mental faculty that is super-sensible an “affective ambivalence.” Kant also extends Burke’s postulation that the

sublime bears upon subjectivity and argues that the sublime is a wholly mental activity. While for Kant there is a moment of recovery in an awe-inspiring experience, which makes it elevating for theorists such as Burke and Longinus, the moments of interruption appear more negative, especially couched in metaphors of terror and assault as they are. Blending together the ideas of the three theorists, the sublime—for the purposes of this paper—can be defined as reaction that renders a judgement that bears upon the self: as Brady writes, “Although we react to nature’s might by feeling physically powerless and small, ultimately, we judge ourselves sublime.”⁴ Through an initial reaction, the sublime transports one through the use of elevated language and images that engage self-preservation, and enacts a mental process that raises supersensible elements of subjectivity above the sensible world that inspires them. As such, three crucial, critical elements that all three theorists consider are most important to this paper and will be discussed within it: those of affective ambivalence, transcendence or elevation, and a supersensible subjectivity.

To better refine the focus of this paper, it is imperative that one central question and its answer are explored: *Why is this paper applying critical theories of the sublime to the works of authors who did not engage with the sublime explicitly?* Under the umbrella of the sublime, this paper aims to unite and examine the selected works of three authors who wrote in such a way that makes the sublime useful as a critical tool. These writers do not always engage with the sublime explicitly, either in their self-reflective writings or in their creative works, but the critical thought of their time shows that it was developing as they wrote. The writers’ uses of self-reflective vocabulary and images in their own critical works (including Wordsworth’s “Preface to Lyrical Ballads,” Shelley’s *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour*, and Woolf’s *Moments of Being*), indicate their engagement with ideas that resemble the movement implicit within the sublime,

and could thus be endowed with a greater critical depth through their comparison with the theories of its critics.

Developments in the study of the sublime during the time in which Wordsworth, Shelley, and Woolf wrote are conducive to a reading that maps these changes onto the works through giving shape to what the authors themselves name in other words. Within the writers' terminology in relation to temporality, such as the Wordsworthian "spots of time" or the Woolfian "moments of being," one can find elements that mirror the affective ambivalence, elevation, and supersensible subjectivity of the critics, though each critic engages with each critical point to a varying degree.

The ways in which Wordsworth, Shelley, and Woolf use the embedded act of retrospection in their texts mirrors—through its shift between the past and present—the movement of the sublime effect between an overwhelming image and its bearing upon subjectivity, and the shift from one's sense of displeasure from being subjugated by this image to a pleasing sense of reason's supersensibility. It is this necessity of movement, travel, and transport as concepts in their own right in the specific texts of the three writers, even before applying the sublime as a critical concept, that makes the study of movement in the texts in terms of the sublime worthwhile. Through the use of the embedding/nesting of memory within the texts, the authors construct a dynamic relationship where characters experience transport on an experiential level, and readers experience it on a spectatorial level. In moments that this paper argues are sublime, both reader and characters are kept off-balance in an unstable relation to the text: characters cannot meet with understanding what is coming from the sensual world and readers are unseated by the language that reflects the unstable subjectivity of the characters.

In exploring the sublime in these specific texts, this paper is attempting a novel reading of the sublime. Unlike others before it, this paper examines the use of the sublime primarily through the concept of embedding and nesting in the text, whereby temporality and subjectivity are manipulated. While others have critically applied the concept of the sublime to these particular works, they haven't done so in a comparative manner between texts that also takes the sublime's various contexts and inflections into consideration: those of the Romantic, Gothic, and Modernist sublimines. In addition, other critical examinations of these texts in relation to the sublime have not taken into account the ways in which time is nested or embedded and have not considered how an author's own critical vocabulary relates to the expression of the sublime elements in their creative work. It is significant to analyze these moments of movement within these creative works using the sublime as a critical construct because doing so can tell us more about how we envision ourselves and our engagement with overwhelming elements of the sensible world and will provide a literary mapping of how these writers have done so in the past, even if not in explicit terms.

In order to differentiate between the ideas of the three main theorists of the sublime, I will give a summary of the arguments that each offers and tie their examinations together. Beginning with Longinus, the term "sublime" is closely tied to language that elevates and expresses a deviation from the common: feelings such as "wonder, awe, rapture, astonishment, ecstasy, or elevation" refract a sublime quality of the text onto its audience.⁵ As Philip Shaw argues, Longinus' orientation is "primarily rhetorical" because he considers the ways in which orators can "transport" their audiences. But at the same time this "mode of speech...is indeterminate or without form": it relies on intangible factors that lie beyond rhetoric.⁶ This rhetorical orientation makes sense given the ancient world's focus on theater and oratory, but

Longinus' text emphasizes that the aim of the sublime is not to persuade, but to transport: "to be convinced is usually within our control whereas amazement is the result of an irresistible force beyond the control of any audience." This amazement results from a "greatness [that] appears suddenly; like a thunderbolt it carries all before it and reveals the writer's full power in a flash."⁷ Longinus' simultaneous focus on the spoken word and its impact on an audience creates a sense of movement between the two, a moment of transformation. Because *Peri hypsous* "focus[es] on the creative and receptive dimensions of the verbal arts...on the mind of the writer and on the effect on the audience," Robert Doran argues that, contrary to Shaw, Longinus' work falls within the mode of the subjective and is of import to the "'subjective turn' of modern aesthetics."⁸ For the purposes of this paper, consideration of the rhetorical elements within Longinus' sublime will follow Doran and examine how they can bear on subjectivity.

Two prominent relational terms that Longinus uses to describe the effect of the sublime indicate that it is both powerful and elevating: it subjugates its audience, yet also raises them up. Much of the language surrounding Longinus' sublime is inherently violent in nature, so much so that Shaw categorizes Longinus' sublime as a figurative "discourse of domination," which seeks to "ravish and intoxicate the audience so that a grand conception may be instilled in the mind" without concern for any sort of persuasive justification.⁹ At the same time, Longinus' language references a height that would influence subsequent theorists to consider the sublime on a figurative vertical axis. Through comparing the sublime—synonymous with "height" in some translations—to the destructive forces such as a "whirlwind," Longinus blends a language of elevation, verticality, and power that signals sublime transport. Longinus maintains that his sublime is an effect, and not a style: it transcends the levels of plain, middle, and grand speech.

One of the marks of sublimity that Longinus notes is the ability of a sublime conception to endure in the memory of an audience, so much so that the audience confuses authorship: souls are “naturally uplifted by the truly great,” and “fill[s]” them “with delight and pride as if [they] had [themselves] created what [they] heard.”¹⁰ These sentiments draw deeply on the subjective, spectatorial experience of the reader/listener and examine, along with Longinus’ other sources of sublimity, how a reader/listener is transported into sublime moments by uses of language. Five sources, or “rich fountains,” that fix the sublime in memory include “vigor of mental conception,” “strong and inspired emotion,” “the adequate fashioning of figure (both of speech and of thought),” “nobility of diction...includ[ing] the choice of words and the use of figurative and artistic diction” and “distinguished and dignified word-arrangement.”¹¹ Specifically, in his enumeration on the different “figures,” Longinus distinguishes between figures of speech such as apostrophe, amplification, and hyperbaton, and figures of thought such as visualization, metaphor, and digression. In order to better explain some of these sources, Longinus enlists examples from the writings of Sappho and Homer to illustrate “fierce and transporting passion” and how it allows one to combine disparate things in examination. In relation to Sappho’s writing, Longinus observes how “her selection of the most vital details and her working them into one whole which produce the outstanding quality of the poem.”¹² Longinus marvels at Sappho’s ability to unite “contradictory phrases” under “the same moment of experience”¹³—an ability that, as we will see, is apparent in the works of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Woolf through their combination—but not unification—of a multiplicity of temporal experiences.

A final level on which to examine Longinus’ work is in relation to the construction of conceptions or mental images. Longinus writes of the imagination, defined here as “when ecstasy or passion makes you appear to see what you are describing and enables you to make

your audience see it.”¹⁴ In poetry, Longinus argues, the aims of the poet are “amazement” through visionary capacity, a kind of sublime transport that Burke also denotes in his theory. At this point, Longinus distinguishes between the practice of rhetoric and the effect of the sublime, comparing the temporary-yet-overpowering impact of the latter to the more contrived practice of the former; while the sublime operates on the textual level, its effect is comprised of more than rhetoric. Using the metaphor of a painting, Longinus compares the relationship between rhetoric and the sublime: “pervading grandeur all around obscures the presence of rhetorical devices” in the same way that light stands out upon a painting.¹⁵ For Longinus, the sublime unleashes such an overpowering might that the reader, like the subject in a work of literature, feels scattered, in disarray. The notion of transport and the notion of the sublime “localized” within a moment both begin with Longinus: the audience is never sure when a facet of sublimity will bombard/assault them in speech or in text.

The primary factor that differentiates the theory of Longinus from the theories of Burke and Kant is categorization: for Longinus, the sublime is speech acting upon an audience, whereas for Kant and Burke it is an aesthetic theory that bears upon subjectivity. All of these theories, however, put into play the notion of aesthetic distance: the audience is removed from physical harm while coming under the influence of danger and fear at one remove. In his first section of the *Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke expresses an idea that resembles Longinus’ assertion on creative genius in relation to the sublime: “some degree of novelty must be one of the materials in every instrument which works upon the mind.”¹⁶ In other words, in order to move the mind from its base state of indifference, there must be something novel about the rendering of the sublime in any given text. Although the *Philosophical Enquiry* begins by exploring the psychological experiences of pain, pleasure, and curiosity, its main concern in the sublime is

instead “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger...whatever...operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime.”¹⁷ As a requisite for the sublime, this terror must be experienced at a remove: “at certain distances, and with certain modifications,” one can derive “delight” from terrifying representations.

With terror, Burke believes, comes the impulse towards self-preservation and with it the delight that attends “an idea of pain and danger without being actually in such circumstances.”¹⁸ This emphasis on the idea relates, perhaps, to Longinus’ “imagination,” and draws heavily upon one’s subjectivity in forming it. Elaborating on his notion of delightful terror, Burke defines the effect of the sublime as “astonishment,” the “state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror,” the “effect of the sublime in its highest degree.”¹⁹ Astonishment carries with it two chief effects—obscurity and suspension. In the *Philosophical Enquiry*, terror is defined as “the ruling principle of the sublime” and obscurity as “necessary” to its effects; when one can ascertain the “full extent” of danger, “apprehension vanishes.”²⁰ This focus on obscurity as a tool of apprehension contrasts with Kant’s foregrounding of a type of reason that exists above the sensible realm and comprehends not only the “extent” of some infinity, but also allows for moments of cognitive recuperation.

Through using the notion of the “idea,” moments of obscurity are contrasted with those of clarity. In comparing a painting to a textual description of a painting, Burke compares the relatively clear portrayal of some reality in a portrait to its description which would “raise a very obscure and imperfect *idea* of such objects,” but “a stronger *emotion*” through its description using speech.²¹ One way in which a strong emotional response can be rendered is through organization: in the same way that Longinus considers a fragment of Sappho’s poetry as sublime for its combination of various senses, in reading a verse of Milton, Burke notes a succession of

natural images that reference height whereby “The mind is hurried out of itself, by a croud [sic] of great and confused images, which affect because they are crouded [sic] and confused.”²² Other passages in the *Enquiry* likewise evoke the indefinite idea of infinity that Kant contends with and yet comes to a different conclusion: “The ideas of eternity, and infinity, are among the most affecting we have, and yet perhaps there is nothing of which we really understand so little, as of infinity and eternity.”²³ Along with infinity’s transcendence of dimension, there is also—on the more sensible level—vastness, or “greatness of dimension,” which manipulates scale.²⁴ Burke considers this “extension” in regard to “length, height, or depth,” and speculates that depth, in particular, distorts one’s conceptions.²⁵ On the opposite end of the spectrum, the “infinite” potential of division offers an idea of the sublime as, compared to the notion of addition which aggrandizes scale, an extreme “littleness” can “push our discoveries yet downward...in tracing which the imagination is lost as well as the sense.”²⁶ Along with this spiraling that inhibits sense, Burke calls the notion of succession the “artificial infinite” for its ability to make the mind believe that the succession will continue without limit.²⁷ The “artificial infinite,” as we will see, may be produced via the nesting structures that Woolf uses to great effect in her fiction, and Wordsworth to an effect in his poetry.

Anticipating Kant’s comparison of the beautiful and the sublime, Burke outlines key differences between the two aesthetic judgements: namely that the sublime elicits a sense of “vast dimensions,” of the “rugged and negligent,” of the dark and gloomy,” and the “solid, and even massive.”²⁸ In Burke’s construction as well as Kant’s, the beautiful and the sublime exist in a binary relationship where the presence of one represents the absence of the other. In his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant furthers Burke’s examination of the sublime and the beautiful through his formulation of aesthetic judgement. For Kant, aesthetic judgement deals

with how to appreciate an object or scene, and the feelings that such an object or scene arouses in its observer. While Kant may prefer the beautiful to the sublime for its harmony and order, the aesthetic experience of the sublime offers more “height” than that of beauty: it is lofty and more transformational than the beautiful. In comparing the beautiful and sublime as aesthetic judgements, both operate on the emotional axis of pleasure and pain and are judgements of taste: like the beautiful, the sublime meets the requirements of Kant’s four “moments”: it is “in its Quantity...shown to be universally valid, in its Quality independent of interest, in its Relation subjective [with] finality, and...in its Modality, necessary.”²⁹ In Kant’s critique, the relationship between one’s imagination—defined as the “image-making capacity of the mind”—and a priori concepts of understanding (including quantity, quality, relation, and causation) differentiates the beautiful from the sublime: whereas, in the beautiful, the imagination and concepts harmonize to create understanding, in the sublime the imagination fails in its reach for concepts to create a relative scale. Through its involvement with a prevailing reason and a failure in understanding and imagination, sublimity for Kant involves the “characteristic feature” of “mental *movement* combined with the estimate of the object”; specifically, the Kantian sublime is bound up with overcoming and transcendence.³⁰

Though some of Kant’s postulations heavily resemble Burke’s theories of the sublime and consider similar concepts (such as infinity), Kant’s theory of the sublime differs from those of Burke and Longinus in that it is found entirely in the mind and refers exclusively to one’s mediation between feelings of subjugation and a recognition of the infinitude of one’s reason, which Kant calls the “supersensible” for its positioning beyond the sensible realm. Like Burke, Kant considers how certain images make one believe that they have the ability to imagine infinity. As Kant writes in his *Analytic of the Sublime*, the sublime “provokes a

representation of *limitlessness*, yet with a super-added thought of its totality.”³¹ Similarly, Kant notes that reason’s ability “even to think [totalities] as a whole indicates a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense.”³² This emphasis on the supersensible is further delineated in the dynamic and mathematical sublime, both of which involve delight, but “indirectly” and as a “negative pleasure” of the imagination’s usurpation.³³

In his section devoted to the dynamically sublime, Kant lists natural examples such as “Bold, overhanging rocks...thunderclouds piled up the vault of heaven, borne along with flashes and peals” and other natural forces that “raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace.”³⁴ Kant’s formal definition of the dynamic sublime involves “nature considered in an aesthetic judgment as might that has no dominion over us.”³⁵ Although Kant’s sublime resides in subjectivity, he uses awe-inspiring scenes from various landscapes to illustrate might in natural phenomena. All the same, Kant notes that it would be “inaccurate” to call an “*Object of nature*” sublime since “all that we can say is that the object lends itself to the presentation of a sublimity discoverable in the mind.”³⁶

By contrast, the mathematical sublime brings the imagination and concepts of understanding into a contact with an enormous magnitude or quantum. In this struggle “for the estimation of the magnitude of things of the world of sense,” the supersensible faculty is awakened as it grasps the notion of a magnitude or quantum as a totality where the imagination and understanding otherwise falter.³⁷ In comparison to Burke and Longinus, for whom transport could have far-ranging implications, Kant’s transport operates in a closed system: it is not extended in the sense that the supersensible faculty intervenes to restore scale. While in his discussion of the notion of infinity, Burke acknowledges that successive ideas could continue *ad*

infinitum and spiral into nothingness, for Kant the supersensible always intervenes and contemplates the infinite as a totality.

In mapping the theorizations of these three main critics onto William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, I will be crafting a methodology that combines the critical language of Longinus, Kant, and Burke with the critical terminology used by Wordsworth, Shelley, and Woolf in their own writings. In drawing on these theorists, this paper will also distinguish between the main routes each maps to sublimity: Longinus' use of rhetorical tools, Burke's use of terror and obscurity, and Kant's relationship between the sensible and supersensible. Specifically, I will focus on their exploration of the sublime in relation to movement, attending to how each writes about affective ambivalence, transport, and elevation or transcendence. This focus on movement will range across imagery and setting; uses of retrospection and nesting techniques; and the language of verticality. This organizational framework enables attention to both the experiential level of characters in the literature and the spectatorial level of the reading audience.

In choosing to consider the relationship of various sublime "categories" that correlate with a distinctive literary movement (such as the Romantic sublime, the Gothic sublime, and the modernist sublime) to the text produced during that period, this paper assumes that there are trends worth tracing from the categorization of the sublime in terms of literary period, and how this categorization can lend itself to a deeper reading of a text and how the concept of this sublime has been used.

Though Wordsworth, Shelley, and Woolf, through their creative works, explore the construction of selfhood, they wrote within vastly different literary and time periods that affected the language with which they examined such themes and elements. As oxymoronic as it sounds,

the sublime has existed as a relatively unified concept in that most theorists who follow the Romantic period consider Longinus, Burke, and Kant together, though at the same time, the sublime has been fractured in the sense that there are distinctive turns within its use as a concept that can be attributable to literary period. The specific texts that I have chosen to study in this paper—Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850 edition), Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and Woolf's *The Waves* (1931)—stand out within the respective Romantic, Gothic, and modernist literary movements as particularly innovative works in terms of their construction. *The Prelude* is innovative for its epic, autobiographical construction out of blank verse, *Frankenstein* for its introduction of the science fiction genre and use of epistolary framing, and *The Waves* for its use of stream of consciousness in the form of a poetic novel; none of these works specifically bind themselves to a stable genre, and all use the structuring device of nesting, and the linguistic use of images and verticality in novel ways.

Chapter II: “All which then we were”:

William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* and the Romantic Sublime

In its assemblage of identity through the use of varying mental and natural landscapes, William Wordsworth’s epic poem *The Prelude* exemplifies the Romantic experience of the sublime as mediated through one’s interactions with the natural world. Though it reflects the contemporary occupation with travel writing, the poem—written between the years 1799-1806, and later revisited by Wordsworth in 1850¹—crafts a sense of movement other than that implied through travel through its retrospective construction of the past. Because of its epic scale and consideration of memories that span Wordsworth’s life, the poem lends itself to a mathematically sublime judgment by both the reader and character: on a spectatorial level, the reader has difficulty in uniting these many fragments into one whole; though the poetic voice struggles with the same, on an experiential level they’re also constantly referred back to past selves as they struggle to move forward. Even as the epic seemingly coheres into a whole, the ordering and expansion of certain retrospections appears like an unstable avalanche; a mountain that cannot withstand its own weight or aspirations. These acts of retrospection create an unsteady process: as Mark Strand notes, “In *The Prelude*, the self *is* because it brings itself into being, recalls itself. It emerges from the fabric of the language of retelling. It incorporates, as it were, the very nature that inspires it into being.”¹ Through the *Prelude*’s use of striking imagery, embedded memories, and a language of verticality, it engages with the affective ambivalence, movement towards transcendence, and subjective supersensibility familiar to critics of the sublime. Throughout the poem, the poetic voice enacts a Sisyphean struggle to roll these episodic spots into a coherent whole that can offer transcendence, whereas the reader—like a spectator—is left to watch the

¹ Note: I’m using the edition of 1849-1850, as it was “the last to pass under [Wordsworth’s] scrutiny” (Baker xxv).

weight of this accumulated whole overtake its creator, driven backwards by some momentum, some force, other than that which exists within the self. Though the poem moves towards transcendence, it never releases its grasp on the sensible world or on the imagination in order to fully accomplish it.

The use of the natural landscape within *The Prelude* is closely intertwined with the development of its lofty themes: as Mark Strand writes, “The experience of landscape is in many ways the experience of *The Prelude*—resonant, evident, large.”² Growing up just outside of England’s verdant Lake District, Wordsworth’s experiences in childhood “had left on his remarkable memory the recollection of many moments when nature had spoken to him directly, startling him into a vivid realization of his own consciousness.”³ In his writings, Wordsworth would impose his childhood impressions of life in Cockermouth’s “river valley of the Derwent” upon his later experiences with “all other vales” and their “special affective power for him.”⁴ As such, though Romantic travel-writing was in vogue at the time of the *Prelude*’s construction, Wordsworth’s use of nature flows from a more personal wellspring than the act of Romantic touring on its own. Thomas Weiskel, in loosely summarizing the process of the poem, notes its course from “‘I have seen such things—I see them still (memory)—and see moreover deeper into them, as if anew (imagination)—I therefore was and am a favored being (identity)—and I can speak (be a poet).’”⁵ Though *The Prelude* as a whole asserts this argument and flows as though a “coursing river,” an image that “runs through the entire poem and provides the analogue for the flowing progress of the long work,”⁶ the embedded versions of the voice’s self present within each book destabilize the overall flow through their eddying. Within this structure, then, the existence of a multivalent self is asserted.

In the fifty-year period extending roughly between 1780 and 1830, poets and thinkers asserted the primacy of the individual imagination and instigated “a range of developments in art, literature, music, and philosophy” that would come to be regarded as Romanticism.⁷ Through the emphasis they placed upon the imagination’s ability to “regenerate mankind spiritually,” proponents of Romantic thought “renounced...rationalism and order” and advocated for the expression of “authentic personal feelings.”⁸ In comparison to more ordered concepts, such personal feelings often involved referral to “enthusiasm, ecstasy, imagination, *páthos*—values and qualities inseparably tied with the sublime.”⁹ A reaction against Neoclassicism, and thereby an expression of those “bent upon escaping [its] formalism and restraint,” these transporative values opposed more grounded conceptions as the sublime did the beautiful.¹⁰

The notion of the sublime during the Romantic period was primarily conveyed through nature: whether through paintings, poetry, or travel diaries, concrete, natural images served as conduits for sublime reflection. Comparing Wordsworth to some of the writers of the later eighteenth century, Samuel Monk differentiates between “picturesque travelers resembl[ing] faddists” in search of “theatricality” and the “high seriousness” with which Wordsworth regarded nature.¹¹ For Wordsworth, like Kant, “God and the mind of man” stood as “the two chief realities”: two lofty forms that censure the propensity of the picturesque to “burlesque the profound.”¹² The more picturesque accounts of Neoclassical writers such as John Dennis, Lord Shaftesbury, and Joseph Addison “across the French and Swiss Alps” in the 1690s prefigured the Romantic interest in travel writings on “sublime” landscapes. Though these writers wrote with a sense of the “‘agreeable horror’ that the vast and the irregular in nature instills”—a thought that Edmund Burke would map onto the sublime in 1757—their depictions still presented the landscape in terms of the picturesque, and not in loftier terms.¹³ Because of the popularity of the

sublime during the early Romantic period, its representations in the arts “had stock motifs, themes and formal qualities...employed by artists, poets and authors to achieve a ‘sublime’ register...irrespective of their familiarity with specific theoretical texts.”¹⁴ Representations of the sublime in the Romantic period thus weren’t always produced with the tenets of the theoretical texts of Longinus, Burke, and Kant in mind, but instead reflected the loose use of their ideas in other forms of media produced at the same time. Thus, the study of natural motifs such as the mountains, oceans, and storms that Wordsworth uses could be approached as a reflection of earlier “stock motifs” of the time, produced at second remove, but also as a reflection of the scenes of his childhood. At the same time, by comparing the use of such motifs in *The Prelude* to their use by the original theorists, we can see Wordsworth’s novel usage of these motifs in terms of the sublime.

Wordsworth’s own critical language in “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” (1800) reveals a theoretical stance that informs his construction of poetry. In his “Preface,” Wordsworth’s stated aims are to “[fit] to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation” and to throw over this common language “a certain coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect.”¹⁵ In these first few pages, Wordsworth emphasizes the passionate quality of language while simultaneously focusing on the presentation of the passions through it. Poetry, defined here as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” also deeply involves the individual sensibilities of the poet: one who possesses “a greater promptness to think and feel without external excitement.”¹⁶ Though there is a seeming contradiction between the spontaneous expression of emotion through language and its removed construction in tranquility without external stimuli, the notion of

“nesting” captures the relation between the two: that of the impression of the past, and its creative presentation through the lens of the present.

In the “Preface,” Wordsworth also addresses such stylistic devices as the “personification of abstract ideals” which, in his opinion, distance poetry too greatly from “the very language of men”: a stance that differs from Longinus’ assertion that various stylistic forms elevate the language.¹⁷ It’s also important to study language as a reflection of the Romantic sublime: Wordsworth’s insistence on common language and “the common man” “brings his work into spiritual alignment with those democratic revolutions.”¹⁸ Though the “Preface” argues that no difference, save for meter, divides his poetry from prose and that Wordsworth uses no device to “elevate the style,” he uses what Longinus calls figures of thought to infuse a “temperate” style with “passions” “dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures.”¹⁹

Despite the “common” language with which Wordsworth composes his poem, one can yet trace the existence of lofty themes. While for some Romantics the traditionally “divine” experience was secularized through the lens of the sublime, for others nature began to take on symbolic, divine qualities: for the “traditional idea of the Fall from divine grace Wordsworth and the Romantics substitute the alienation of the self from the life of nature: wholeness is lost and must be recovered.”²⁰ Although, to an extent, the Romantics sought a unity with nature and the sensual world, they also drew a distinction between nature and the realm of the mind. Nature, while inspirational, was not an end in and of itself: instead, it was a conduit to something greater within the self, or some greater divinity outside of the self—some Romantics still viewed the sublime in religious terms, reading Wordsworth’s use of nature as his engagement with the divine. While other Romantics such as Percy Bysshe Shelley sought to become ““a part”” of the

landscapes they observed, Shaw argues that Wordsworth “makes related claims for mountains as symbols of the connection between the human and the divine.”²¹

Though Wordsworth treats nature reverently, within *The Prelude* he favors its formlessness for how it can expand the perimeters of the mind and open the present moment to the recollections of the past. Composed of fourteen “books,” the *Prelude* posits a relatively chronological structure, ranging from a retrospective view of childhood to a view of later years spent traveling, learning, and loving. Though each book involves the use of episodic retrospection, for the purposes of this reading episodes from within Book I (“Introduction: Childhood and School-Time”), Book II (“School-Time (continued)”), Book VI (“Cambridge and the Alps”), and Book XIV (“Conclusion”) are the primary ones I’ll be examining for their nominal structure, and how this contrasts with the episodes held within. In consideration of episodes from these books, I want to focus on how the episodes interplay with the strictures of structural terms such as an “introduction” and “conclusion,” or the more thematic constrictions of school or the well-worn motif of the Alps. Each of these books seems to carry with it an expectation: in the first, the intense pressure to “begin” properly (though Wordsworth submits this pressure, ultimately); the pressure to learn; the pressure to depict the majesty of the Alps with proper reverence; and the pressure to sum the entirety of the poem up. In general terms, the first and last books focus on how best to return to the visionary selves of the past, whereas the book in the Alps focuses on how nature can help in these aims. As a whole, Mark Strand makes the important distinction that Wordsworth “is not making contact with a place so much as he is with the sense of a place...the sense of place is precisely what he carries with him and has since he was a child.”²² If it is this sense that Wordsworth returns to time and again, then he actualizes

within every thought his well-known postulation in his ode that the “child is father to the man,” a notion that implies a nested vision of the past itself.²³

In the passages from *The Prelude* selected, the use of figures of thought and speech to describe motifs of terrifying natural landscapes (to invoke the “passion” of self-preservation) reflects the sublime as conceptualized by Longinus and Burke. Throughout the use of this language and imagery, both the reader and “I” of the poem experience the divide between the supersensible and the sensible world. While the sensible realm is given primacy in childhood for its creation of impression, in the adult’s retrospection the supersensible holds sway. It is the supersensible that allows for the “double-exposure technique” whereby Wordsworth “juxtaposes two widely separated periods of time in such a way that we are made drastically conscious of the degree of growth that has taken place between Stage One and Stage Two.”²⁴ As Wordsworth surmises in the beginning of Book II, through his remembrance:

A tranquillising spirit presses now
 On my corporeal frame, so wide appears
 The vacancy between me and those days
 Which yet have such self-presence in my mind,
 That, musing on them, often do I seem
 Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
 And of some other Being...

(II. 27-33)

This sudden interjection from the perspective of the present breaks in upon Wordsworth’s retrospection of playing during his schooldays with his friends. In these lines, Wordsworth finds himself in the uncanny conundrum of feeling “self-presence” within memories of the past,

though recognizing the past as “some other Being” entirely. Recalling this sort of awareness of presence, Herbert Lindenberger has called the “structural unit” of the poem “spots of time” where a spot—“the record of a concrete past event used to illustrate some more general statements about the past”—is recalled in the tranquility of retrospection.²⁵ This comparison between the past and the past-within-the-present involves a sense of ambivalence that mirrors the feelings one has when the supersensible divides one from the sensible; as when a recognition of the supersensible “places us at a remove from nature,”²⁶ in the “odd co-presence of the mind” one realizes that the past as it once was is lost, while simultaneously feeling a sense of anticipation for the future.²⁷

In the spots of time, these moments of “double-exposure,” “the introspection is at the same time a retrospection” whereby “original impressions of delight are recalled to renewed life.”²⁸ When, from the vantage point of the present, Wordsworth “recollect[s] [a] scene’s emotional impact in...tranquility,” he sees the scene “not for what it was, but for what, after rumination, it had become *for him*.”²⁹ Using the metaphor of a landscape mirrored upon a lake, Klaus Mortensen argues that the “immediate situation...is replaced by its meditative reflection” in Wordsworth’s poetry: like the image reflected on the lake, the scene refracts that which sits above it, “throwing back the landscape above in a vertical, upward movement.”³⁰ Many of the images constructed by critics metaphorically use mirrors to describe the use of retrospection in *The Prelude*. Outside of the image of the mirror and the lake discussed earlier, another compares the refractive abilities of memory in Wordsworth to “rays of light that pass through a prism and reveal constantly new possibilities of color to the observing eye.”³¹ The use of the mirror as a key to the text is particularly apt, especially in light of the assertion that those who seek to tell stories about the past “can be both a realist and a symbolist at once,” opening the text to be read

on more than one level.³² As a whole, what is occurring in these moments could be described as an epiphanic moment whereby “apprehensions hitherto disparate will suddenly coalesce to form another level of understanding.”³³ For example, in his “seventeenth year,” Wordsworth notes how “the power of truth / Coming in revelation, did converse / with things that really are” (II. 386-394). The power of this revelation comes from its veiling in “things that really are”—its epiphanic nature is both contrasted by, and built upon, its relation to nature. The cohesion between nature and truth brings about the spread of the “sentiment of Being” that Wordsworth feels

O'er all that leaps and runs, and shouts and sings,
 Or beats the gladsome air; o'er all that glides
 Beneath the wave, yea, in the wave itself,
 And mighty depth of waters. Wonder not
 If high the transport, great the joy I felt,
 Communing in this sort through earth and heaven
 With every form of creature...

(II. 406-412)

Wordsworth feels this sublime sense of Being within sentient and non-sentient nature alike, which occasions a “transport” through the vision’s “communion” of “earth and heaven.” Even though an episode, such as this recollection, can involve an understanding, this understanding is incomplete: in Wordsworth, the nests function as mini epiphanies through the time spots, though the “revelatory” potential of each is lessened when the process repeats itself over and over.

One of the first instances within Wordsworth's grand poem that looms out of the first book much like the "summit of a craggy ridge" is the oft-quoted incident of the "boat theft," occurring from lines 340-410 (I. 370). When in his early school days, Wordsworth happens upon a lone, tethered boat and decides to take the boat for a turn about the lake. Rowing the boat out onto the calm lake whilst fixing his gaze upon a high ridge, the voice notes:

When, from behind that craggy steep till then
 The horizon's bounds, a huge peak, black and huge,
 As if with voluntary power instinct,
 Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
 And growing still in the stature the grim shape
 Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
 For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
 And measured motion like a living thing,
 Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned...

(I. 376-385)

One of the more noticeable literary devices used in the passage is that of repetition, as the speaker is terrified to the extent that he is unable to process his experience: he can only repeat signifiers that are rendered empty on their repetition—for example, the top of the "huge peak, black and huge" (line 377). The use of simile within the lines also makes the peak appear alive, even as it is an approximate language: it rises above the horizon "as if with voluntary power," and "like a living thing" (lines 378, 383). Though the verses here express a feeling of transport and elevation through the description of the mountain peak in approximate terms, the experience is not sublime for the voice in that moment, as there is no aesthetic distance to separate the

terrified rower from this seemingly immediate threat. In a “time spot” such as this, Wordsworth writes in the present tense as though the spot is occurring, though it complicates the poetic voice as the event is constructed through retrospection a number of years after the events have already transpired. As will be seen in Virginia Woolf’s “moments of being,” the moments—like the “time spots”—are most often ambivalent themselves, perhaps occasioning their strong presence in the memory. Hence, for the Wordsworth constructing the poem, the experience could be sublime, whereas for the young Wordsworth who experienced it, it would not have been:

Wordsworth the poet, like the reader, here experiences the sublime on a spectatorial level—an alienating experience, as one becomes a spectator of one’s own past. After this experience, the voice attempts to process the events though only finds a darkness that pervades his mind that obliterates any examination of the beautiful: no “familiar shapes” or “pleasant images of trees, / Of sea or sky” remain (lines 395-397). From this short rumination on the scene’s effect, the voice moves to exalt in a new stanza “Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!” in a direct apostrophe to “Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought” (lines 401-402). Though the ideas are formless, and the lines exalt a formless ideal, the form of the stanzas within the book speaks to the nesting technique of Wordsworth: how, in the quoted examples, the poem ambivalently moves from a moment of assault to one of exaltation in the space of a few lines.

Some of Wordsworth’s primary critics question his literary techniques as well as the structure of the *Prelude* itself for either its self-absorption or, alternately, its confusion in voice. Some critiques of *The Prelude* by Wordsworth’s contemporaries ultimately thus exhibit its strengths in its relation to the sublime. For example, the poet John Keats—who preferred the “poet’s self-immolation in poetry”—was “discomfited by the ever-recurrent ‘I’ in Wordsworth,” calling his perpetual reference to the self the “Wordsworthian, or egotistical sublime.”³⁴ One

could argue, though, that this attempt to unify many refracted images of oneself under a singular umbrella term is a mathematical and dynamic effort to apprehend a “self” that one can examine as a whole. Another critique, from the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a close friend of Wordsworth, saw within the poem detracting elements such as its “occasional mental bombast” and “an eddying rather than a progression of thought, suggesting the muddy backwashes of a river rather than the clear, swift-running current of the main stream.”³⁵ The language of the critique not only relates to Longinus’ description of the sublime’s ability to assault, but the notion of an “eddying,” circular spiral before a progression is how I would argue that the structural use of embedding is present within the text.

Although the poem at times seems as though it has lost itself in certain episodes or “time spots,” it continually subsumes one eddy only to flow into another. Others argue that the structure of the text is instead “pyramidal.”³⁶ While I would agree that the poem as a whole exhibits a verticality in its sense of progression and upwards movement, in terms of the collection of memories, such a form does not seem to apply—the poetic “I” continually circles back to its past even as it ascends. The subtitle of the poem, though, hints at its true intent in terms of representing a development as the “Growth of a Poet’s Mind.”³⁷ On the whole, Wordsworth’s attempts to examine his own life in its totality—even in an eddying fashion—resemble one’s experience with the mathematical sublime, where one’s mind, oneself, become quanta almost too large to comprehend. As with the proliferation of retrospective episodes within the text, the experience of the mathematical sublime involves “the feeling...of *on and on*, of being lost,” especially through the use of imagery that includes “featureless (meaningless) horizontality or extension” or “a spot in the landscape which becomes an omphalos.”³⁸ As

episodic as these moments can be at their base structure, their multiplication can seem to continue *ad infinitum*.

Wordsworth's use of the natural landscapes on a scenic level, though also on a symbolic, self-referential level, causes some to confuse the sublime abilities of Wordsworth-as-poet for the majesty with which nature is portrayed throughout the *Prelude*. In his *The Time of Unrememberable Being*, Mortensen argues that it is "not the self but imprinted nature that is the active, formative force" and that "this potential [of human intellectuality] derives from the impression of grand external nature."³⁹ If Wordsworth is to be read in light of the Kantian sublime, the sensible, natural realm is important insofar as it brings about the imagination's failure and the expansion of the supersensible. Though the natural realm is unquestionably important to Wordsworth in terms of his childhood memories and his situation in the Romantic movement, within the poem the natural impressions are organized under the framework of the "self." Without the self's creativity, the "imprinted nature" would remain unquestioned, as it is in the imagination of childhood. Mortensen establishes a two-fold structure whereby one can analyze growth—similar to the "double exposure"—where the child's imagination "is formed by early nature impressions" and the adult's mind can "awaken this latent impressed form" through introspective retrospection.⁴⁰ As the process of introspective retrospection is given primacy in adulthood, the self—and not the impressed nature—appears to be the "formative force" through its comprehensive capabilities. It is this self and its supersensible abilities that allow the mind to read and experience the infinite eddying/nesting progression of the poem's various "time spots."

One of the oft-cited episodes within *The Prelude* dealing with the impression of nature is found within "Book Sixth" and its conveyance of Wordsworth's progression around Cambridge and over the Alps. Though the Alps, at the time of Wordsworth's writing, were a well-worn

literary motif, Wordsworth uniquely emphasizes the sublimity not of the Alps, but of the mind that perceives the landscape. After a condensed description of his journeys in a preceding stanza (“From hill to vale we dropped, from vale to hill / Mounted” [VI. 495-6]), Wordsworth devotes more space in a following stanza to a symbol made recognizable by the 1816 poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley:

That very day,
 From a bare ridge we also first beheld
 Unveiled the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved
 To have a soulless image on the eye
 That had usurped upon a living thought
 That never more could be.

(VI. 523-528)

Although the Vale of Chamouny, with its “streams of ice, / A motionless array of mighty waves, / Five rivers broad and vast” eventually makes “rich amends” for the initial disappointment of Mont Blanc, its powerful existence cannot completely dissolve the disappointment of Mont Blanc (lines 531-532). Stylistically, the use of consonance with the letter “d” in the lines surrounding mention of Mont Blanc—alongside the use of the past tense—gives a sense of finality to the observations: Wordsworth “beheld,” “unveiled,” and “grieved.” Additionally, instead of choosing to carry the moment into the time present of his writing, Wordsworth keeps the past tense. The juxtaposition here between the “soulless image” and the “living thought”—one of visual perception versus one of cognitive construction—is interesting for how it bears upon the subjectivity of the poetic voice; the line implies that the expectation, something yet “veiled,” outweighs a reality that appears fully uncovered. Though there is a reference to

“height” and verticality, this reference only occurs in picturesque terms: the more subdued nature of the language juxtaposes with the expected theme of lofty exaltation.

This trend of disappointment that juxtaposes the expectation one holds for the loftiness of nature with its reality continues with the Simplon Pass episode. As Wordsworth makes “one incident...known,” he remarks that his intended path “Was downwards, with the current of that stream”—an assertion that could be read on a descriptive and a symbolic level (VI. 561, 585). In selections from “Book Sixth” that detail the crossing of the Alps, Wordsworth recounts his actions chronologically, observing, “*we had crossed the Alps*” (line 591). The italics juxtaposes with the underwhelming scene and its use of passive voice. Contrasting the ascent implicit in physically crossing of the Alps with the underwhelming symbolic ascent of this crossing, one could contrast the symbolic life of the ascension motif in poem to its underwhelming actualization. The downwards movement perhaps speaks to disappointment, but also juxtaposes with the approaching ascension of imagination. Even as Wordsworth crosses the Alps without realizing it, his sense of disappointment at the hands of expectation leads him to exalt imagination:

Imagination — here the Power so called
 Through sad incompetence of human speech,
 That awful Power rose from the mind’s abyss
 Like an unfathered vapor that enwraps,
 At once, some lonely traveler. I was lost;
 Halted without an effort to break through;
 But to my conscious soul I now can say —
 ‘I recognize thy glory:’ in such strength

Of usurpation, when the light of sense
 Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
 The invisible world, doth greatness make abode

(VI. 592-602)

Following the bare line that ends the previous stanza, in this excerpt Wordsworth begins by exalting the creative force of his imagination as it overpowers his remembrance of the trip some years later: compared to the sparse lines of the preceding stanza, here the imagination colors the language. The poem's depiction of imagination treats it as some "awful Power" that has the potential to possess a "lonely traveler" (VI. 594, 596). The shift in subject that occurs within the poem also relates to its ability to assault: "some lonely traveler" immediately transforms into the poetic "I" in the next sentence: the voice admits, "I was lost" (VI. 596). The poetic voice's exaltation of the imagination makes reference to the obscurity of Burke and cleaves the supersensible from the sensible with his emphasis on moments "when the light of sense / Goes out" (VI. 601-602). Although the imagination here appears, much like the mountain that warrants the sublime judgement, as "militant," it also references the ability this imagination holds to emphasize the mind's might: in the grip of imagination, the mind is "blest in thoughts / That are their own perfection and reward, / Strong in herself and in beatitude / That hides her, like the might flood of Nile" (lines 611-14). This pleasure that the mind receives from its ability to create and imagine, argues Wordsworth, veils the mind's creative abilities as the source of the joy itself, substituting the imagined images themselves for this pleasure. In the same way that lofty natural landscapes encourage a sublime mode of judgment though are not sublime themselves, the mind's creations refer back to its fertile powers and supersensible abilities. The

placement of this section, considered in terms of the nesting of time spots, reads almost as an intervention, and textually mirrors the theoretical action of reason in Kant's sublime.

Following this praise of the imagination, the poem falls back into its consideration of a natural scene, in this case a chasm. The fragment uses the natural landscape to voice a sense of one's experience with infinitude through nature:

The immeasurable height
 Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
 The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
 And in the narrow rent at every turn
 Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,
 The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
 The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
 Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
 As if a voice were in them

(VI. 624-632)

One of the most striking things in this fragment is its use of verb tense for what it communicates about temporality in *The Prelude*. As Harold Bloom writes in his analysis of the scene, "The woods are constantly in a process of decay, but the process will never cease; it will [continue] into Apocalypse. The waterfalls descend...."⁴¹ Though there is a structure in the life cycle of the natural world, the poetic voice notes the infinitude of the process, juxtaposed with the finitude of the singular tree, to borrow from the woodland example; they are finite themselves, taking part in an infinite process: something which the use of the present participle in relation to their actions reinforces. Like the use of an embedding structure with relation to the time spots in *The Prelude*,

the process of decay continues; the embedding process continues without end, even as the time spot appears finite in its singular consideration apart from the rest of the poem. The proliferation of the structural process can be noted through the ways in which certain motifs carry over: take, for example, the “boat theft” incident (in I. 376) where the mountain peak takes on the quality of some monstrous giant. In this fragment, a similar process occurs as landmarks of the natural world personify human qualities: rocks “mutter,” as “black drizzling crags” “speak.”

If, as some argue, Wordsworth “exists in landscape and figures himself as landscape,”⁴² the apocalyptic descent of the gorge reads as a journey into the self, and the following Snowdon episode that I will discuss next as an ascent towards the supersensible. At the same time, if it is through landscape that Wordsworth endows himself with a “double existence” that makes “the poet’s self in *The Prelude* absolute,” his identity becomes inextricable from the sensible realm, even as his abilities reach outside of it.⁴³ The estimation of the imagination within the *The Prelude* appears in line with Kant’s estimation of reason: in the Snowdon episode whereby “The poet’s failure to locate the sublime in nature is countered...by a rousing hymn to the imagination,” the imagination “revealed as infinite in power and scope, appears triumphant over ‘the light of sense.’”⁴⁴ The terminology used in the passage seems to contend that imagination, like reason, is a supersensible force. The anti-rationalism of the Romantic movement could be read in dialogue with Kant’s prioritization of reason: instead of elevating reason over the imagination in Kant’s terms, Wordsworth instead exalts the “imagination,” defined as “that which is conversant with or turns upon infinity.”⁴⁵ Harold Bloom further defines the power of the imagination, like the power of memory, in *The Prelude* as “an intimation of the indestructible” since “it has survived both initial dreariness and the passage of time”: it seemingly operates

within, and outside of, time.⁴⁶ At the same time, this indestructible force is most often symbolized in as “the mist”: a symbol that is at once lofty, obscure, and obscuring.⁴⁷

While for Wordsworth the imagination is the preeminent force, for Kant the imagination is defined as the “image-making conception” that allows for an “affinity of appearances”; it is subservient to reason and “an instrument of reason and its ideas.”⁴⁸ Under Kant’s terms, while reason might be the loftiest form available to the mind, it is not this sense of comprehension that Wordsworth’s sublime ultimately seeks; throughout the *Prelude*, metaphors “locate aesthetic greatness more precisely in the unconscious apotheosis of sense than in the consequent state of recognition.”⁴⁹ Though Wordsworth lyrically expounds upon the landscapes he views, he does not aim to transcend the sensible realm; he never entirely leaves the sensual behind, even as he strives towards the supersensible.

“Book Fourteen,” the conclusion to *The Prelude*, espouses similar ideas concerning the imagination and the mind in an equally striking manner. Important in terms of structure, the events surrounding Mount Snowdon were “excerpt[ed] from its chronological position” in 1791 to appear at the end of *The Prelude* as a “summational image” towards the conclusion of the epic.⁵⁰ Wordsworth’s telling of his autobiography in a manner that warps straightforward chronology also exhibits reason’s mathematically sublime ability to consider one’s own life as a whole, something which the imagination can’t muster. The Snowdon ascent could also serve as a sort of delayed gratification for both the reader and poetic voice (thereby on the spectatorial and experiential level): both have been previously disappointed through the text with representations of Mont Blanc and the crossing of the Alps. With earlier expostulations upon the mountainous landscape and its peaks, Wordsworth describes his interactions with the sensible realm solely as the realm; instead, in the Snowdon passage, Wordsworth attempts to blend the sensible vision

with the supersensible abilities of comprehension, perhaps meant to indicate his growth as a poet. Here, in the final images of Snowdon, the aims of the physical ascent and the symbolic ascent coalesce into one:

For instantly a light upon the turf
 Fell like a flash, and lo! as I looked up
 The moon hung naked in a firmament
 Of azure without cloud, and at my feet
 Rested a silent sea of hoary mist.
 A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved
 All over this still ocean; and beyond,
 Far, far beyond, the solid vapors stretched,
 In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,
 Into the main Atlantic, that appeared
 To dwindle, and give up his majesty,
 Usurped upon far as the sight could reach.

(XIV. 38-49)

In these magnificent lines, the lofty, Romantic motifs of the moon, the ocean, and the mist all conjoined atop a mountain form a powerful composite image that elevates the supersensible. Although the focus of this fragment is seemingly on nature and its sensual realm, the ultimate elusive presence whose existence is hinted at through the poem is the supersensible: that which allows one to comprehend these disparate pieces together as one whole. In stylistic terms, the fragment opens with an expression of ineffability: the “lo!” interjecting in the middle of the second line also divides the earthward gaze and the skyward one. The metaphorical

comparison of hills to whales is a striking one, as is the notion that something as comparatively vast as the ocean could be “usurped.” This interplay between the various images in the fragment could even serve as an example of both the mathematical and dynamic sublime since overwhelming natural forces exist in an enormous magnitude. After this extensive visionary experience, when the “vision” “partially dissolve[s]” into the air, the poetic voice is left with this central assertion:

There I beheld the emblem of a mind
 That feeds upon infinity, that broods
 Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
 Its voices issuing forth to silent light
 In one continuous stream; a mind sustained
 By recognitions of transcendent power...

(XIV. 70-75)

While Wordsworth’s fourteenth book begins with a description of a mountaintop, the ocean, and moonlight—all clearly Romantic motifs—this state of clairvoyant recognition that follows the bursting imagistic scene seems to portend a new direction in the text, as the speaker outlines qualities of a poet that mirror those outlined in the “Preface.” The word choices that Wordsworth makes in the above fragment indicate the contrasting relationship between the sensible and supersensible because the mind is such as it “feeds upon infinity”: it engages with the supersensible in sensible terms (XIV. 71). Within this fragment, the poetic voice aggrandizes the mind of the poet through comparing it to elevated elements, and in a way, attempts itself to transcend the nests of his own creation. While, in various places throughout *The Prelude*, Wordsworth discusses the vocation of a poet and his development within that role, through

choosing to follow the loftiest descriptive passage in the poem with points from the “Lyrical Preface,” he displays a sense of conviction in the poet’s abilities to engage with the supersensible realm, even if it cannot entirely escape modes of sensible experience and representation.

Chapter III: “The bolt has entered my soul”:

The Gothic Sublime in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

If Mary Shelley were to learn that most people today recognize her infamous creation in a mute, towering, green monster with electrical bolts protruding from his neck, she would be greeted with an aberration very different from the lachrymose, vengeful Creature that she crafts in her novel *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Although Shelley develops a sense of sublime affect in her novel through modes of textual construction, the relative obscurity of her monster lurks behind the construction of the text itself, meandering within Captain Walton’s letters and Victor Frankenstein’s retrospections alike. While the Creature is briefly described in his “birth” scene, outside of his “dull yellow eye,” “yellow skin [that] scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath,” “shriveled complexion” and “straight black lips,” the reader learns little else—the descriptions are as fragmented as the non-cohesive pieces of which the Creature is composed.¹ Essential to *Frankenstein*’s consideration as a Romantic and Gothic novel, a sense of this obscurity is “necessary” in order “to make any thing [sic] very terrible”: “when we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes.”² Though this chapter will consider the sublime affect as mediated through natural landscape, the nesting/embedded construction of the novel, and its language of verticality, it will frame these considerations through key critical movements in theorizations of the sublime, including affective ambivalence, a sense of transcendence or elevation, and a subjective supersensibility. The chapter will consider the techniques of the text and the applied aspects of the theorists as mediated through a sense of the Gothic uncanny as figured by the Creature. In the text, reader and character alike experience suggestions of the Creature’s appearance with a sense of dread and terror, to the extent that some instances might

shift from ambivalence to full-on terror through a dissolution of aesthetic distance. In such moments, the reader's separation from the text as a spectator is cemented.

Part of the work in examining Shelley's novel alongside the popular Romantic and Gothic motifs requires contextualization. The story of the novel's conception and the infamous stormy night that held Mary Wollstonecraft (Shelley), Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, and John Polidori inside the Villa Diodati and generated the Gothic terror writing competition is almost as famous as the novel itself. As a whole, the year 1816 was remembered as "the year without a summer" due to weather-effects produced by the 1815 volcanic eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia, which caused atmospheric changes that lowered temperatures across the globe and shrouded the sun, providing a bleak atmospheric setting for the tales.³ The weather, along with Shelley's travels through the mountains to reach Geneva—a trip explored in her *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, co-authored with her husband—might have served as inspiration for the setting of the novel.

In addition to the cultural experience of drastic climate change, new scientific findings and studies surrounding organic life influenced Shelley's text and served as a realistic basis for the initial fears and adverse reactions of her critics. Contemporary scientific investigations into galvanism exacerbated the fears surrounding a potential for reanimation. The Italian physician Luigi Galvani pioneered the study of galvanism in the 1780s through applying electricity to a dead frog, a practice which Shelley notes as an inspiration for her writing in the 1831 preface to *Frankenstein*.⁴ These public examinations of the nature of life throughout the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries correlated with the creation of the Gothic novel, a literary form focusing on a pleasurable sense of terror. When first coined by the author Horace Walpole in 1764 as a joke, the term "Gothic" in a literary sense initially referred to the

Goths, a Germanic people, and creations that exhibited their style. While original Gothic authors such as Walpole and Ann Radcliffe primarily used elements of the supernatural in conjunction with mysterious, far-off destinations to evoke terror, Shelley's early nineteenth-century Gothic "gave a scientific form to the supernatural formula."⁵ Though eventually authors such as Bram Stoker, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Oscar Wilde would produce visions of a more horrific "Urban Gothic" in the Victorian *fin de siècle*, *Frankenstein* occupies an odd position between the early modes of Gothic terror and the following modes of Gothic horror: between Gothic works that inspired terror through a sense of the unknown, and those that relied more heavily on graphic scenes of sudden violence.⁶

Despite shifts within the Gothic genre, many of its works adhere to a number of basic tenets: they transport the reader to "strange places"; relish the dynamics of "power and constraint"; inspire doubt; and introduce conflicting time periods—like a riptide, the texts and their themes get caught in a flux, with one age beginning and another trying to depart.⁷ On the whole, Gothic novels "attempt to *involve* the reader in a new way...the reader is held in suspense with the characters and increasingly there is an effort to shock, alarm, and otherwise rouse him."⁸ These literary experimentations upon the reader as an acknowledged spectator reflect the reader's experience of the sublime within Shelley's text, as we will see. Though Gothic novels borrow elements from Romantic works of literature, and Romantic texts certainly exhibit qualities of their Gothic predecessors, from "the culture of periodical reviews during the 1790s and early 1800s" onwards, a chasm was externally crafted between the two movements, often due to the disdain that Romantic authors, critics, and poets expressed for the Gothic's popular appeal.⁹ Other poets, such as Coleridge, "dismissed [the Gothic] as a tawdry form of mass visual entertainment akin to that of the phantasmagoric show."¹⁰ The Romantic critique of the Gothic

novel for its visual elements is hypocritical, as the Romantic writers and poets of the time (such as Coleridge himself) often relied upon haunting visual images for their relation to the reader and the sublime. The disdain for the Gothic also had a gendered dimension, as the “Romantic literati” “discard[ed] the Gothic as the cheap shudders of servants, nursemaids, and old women,” while “Romanticism present[ed] itself as the masculine endeavor of a more penetrating, more sublime spiritual quest.”¹¹ Interestingly, Shelley subverts this expectation of the Gothic by having two male figures voice the tale: in a nested format, Captain Walton (a male traveler, and thus perhaps a Romantic motif, at that) writes to his sister concerning Frankenstein’s tale, a story told in retrospection by Frankenstein himself.

Borrowing the term from Jerome McGann, Townshend and Wright opt to identify Romanticism instead with “Romantic ideology,” and define it as the “stylized and cultivated self-presentation of Romantic poets and essayists.”¹² Through acknowledging Romantic aims as self-conscious constructions, Townshend and Wright move to shatter the divide between “Romantic” and “Gothic” as stringent categories. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to examine how Romantic figures identified the Gothic in order to situate Shelley’s text within its time and fully grasp its revolutionary nature. In considering the two movements in 1885, William John Courthouse used a metaphorical language reliant on Romantic interaction with the French Revolution, a cause which disenchanted many figures by the Revolution’s end. Courthope writes of a “tendency to encourage Romantic feeling,” which can “be either so chastened by judgement and reflection as simply to intensify the pleasures of the imagination or, if unchecked by reason, may ripen into revolt against the whole order of existing society.”¹³ The language Courthope uses in his passage contrasts—alongside the Gothic and Romantic movements—the forces of reason and imagination in a dynamic that mirrors the language of the sublime as constructed by Kant. In

light of Courthope's construction, the Romantics are presented as favoring the supersensible elevation of Kant, whereas the Gothics are unraveled into disorder, remaining with the failure of the imagination instead of with the supersensible's elevation.

In their early reviews of *Frankenstein*, many critics wrote unfavorably in their consideration of rumors surrounding the anonymous author's sex, or of the markedly Gothic elements that the text reflected; for the most part, reviews written following its release were aghast at Shelley's "progeny."¹⁴ For example, an anonymous review from *Bell's Court and Fashionable Magazine* published in March 1818 found the novel "a very bold fiction" and noted that "did not the author, in a short Preface, make a kind of apology, we should almost pronounce it to be impious."¹⁵ While some saw Shelley's text as a literary outlier for its "immoral" subject-matter, others grounded it as a product of contemporary Gothic trends in fiction: for example, a reviewer from *The Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany* thought "All these monstrous conceptions" to be "the consequences of the wild and irregular theories of the age."¹⁶ Through the respective reviewers' critiques of "Germanic" aspects of the novel,¹⁷ they associate the Gothic trend with something non-native to England, something which ironically mirrors the foreign, "Gothic" settings of such novels.

Other reviewers praised *Frankenstein's* engagement with the natural landscape in Romantic terms, even as they critiqued the novel's "Gothic" elements. One review acclaimed the "grandeur" of the natural scenery that Shelley depicts, though it also stated that Shelley's writings would be "improved" if she "stud[ied] the established order of nature" rather than "revolt[ing] our feelings by hazardous innovations."¹⁸ Some of these critiques might have been coded against Shelley as a female author, as her work dealt with themes that were more horrific in nature than those explored by her contemporary female authors. For example, an 1818

reviewer found the fact that the author of *Frankenstein* was “a female” to be “an aggravation of that which is the prevailing fault of the novel”, and they dismiss the work at the end of the review “without further comment.”¹⁹

In her personal writings in *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (1817) and in her diaries, Shelley explores the role of a female author. In terms of content, much of Shelley's diary serves as “a factual record only” and concerns “a pattern of domestic instability, with repeated images of Mary packing, traveling, moving house.”²⁰ These “terse” notes contrast with Shelley's novels in which she expounds upon “taboo subjects, disturbing in the intensity with which they explored dangerous subliminal areas of consciousness” and gives vent to an “emotional turmoil” that is masked in her personal writings.²¹ Though many Romantic poets and figures would situate epistolary or diarist modes of writing beneath the “loftier” aims of poetry, by including her husband's “Mont Blanc” poem alongside her journal and the letters they co-authored (and by beginning *Frankenstein* with a letter sequence as a frame-narrative), Shelley plays with the expectations of the day. Many of her novels, in fact, use “a personal narrative format,” such as *Frankenstein's* “private letter,” allowing Shelley to “adopt a variety of personae to convey submerged areas of her experience.”²² Considering the iceberg—Freud's symbol of the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious divisions—in relation to Shelley, one can find on the tip of the iceberg her personal writings; her novels, in contrast, appear “submerged” and steeped in the repressed areas of existence, such as nightmares and loss. Using watery metaphors herself to describe the “flow” of her thoughts, in a diary entry from February 1822, Shelley writes of the pain she experiences when she is required to “check expression and make the overflowing mind return to its usual channel.”²³ The language to describe her own thoughts appears to echo the

language used in translations of Kant, whereby the imagination's extension is "checked" by the seeming infinitude of some scene.

Before examining examples of sublimity within *Frankenstein*, it is worthwhile to examine the elevated language used to describe nature in Shelley's diaries and *History*. In a journal entry dating to July 1816 in Chamonix, Shelley writes: "Nothing can be more desolate than the ascent of this mountain—the trees in many places have been torn away by avalanches," and with a "vast & dreadful desolation...a dense white mist covered the vale."²⁴ The poignant recollection of the landscape within the journal reflects a sense of desolation, obscurity, and might: all crucial elements of the sublime experience as theorized in Burke and Kant. Likewise, in "Letter II" of *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, the Shelleys write with reverence concerning thunderstorms and mountaintops, two common motifs of the sublime in Kant that are rife with ambivalence: "One night we *enjoyed* a finer storm than I had ever before beheld. The lake was lit up...all the scene illuminated for an instant, when a pitchy blackness succeeded, and the thunder came in frightful bursts over our heads amid the darkness."²⁵ In closing the letter, Shelley addresses her half-sister Fanny directly, promising: "we will endeavour, by the magic of words, to transport the ethereal part of you to the neighbourhood of the Alps, and mountain streams, and forests."²⁶ The passage, echoing the Longinian consideration of "transport" as a sublime affect, highlights the ability of language to transport a reader. Finally, the language used in *History* reflects upon the subjective supersensibility of Kant, as the astonishing natural scenery bears back upon one's own mental aptitudes:

The immensity of these aerial summits excited, when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a sentiment of extatic [sic] wonder, not unallied to madness. And remember this was all one scene, it all pressed home to our regard and our imagination. Though it embraced a

vast extent of space, the snowy pyramids which shot into the bright blue sky seemed to overhang our path...all was as much our own, as if we had been the creators of such impressions in the minds of others as now occupied our own.”²⁷

The majesty of the mountains that the Shelleys perceive renders any sort of confidence in estimation of proportion: as in Burke’s notion of proportion and Kant’s mention of scale in the dynamic sublime, the sheer scale of the natural world astounds, and allays comparison. The scenes the Shelleys observe also bear upon their minds, overwhelming them to the extent that their experiences appear as “law” for the experience of others. This vision, then, combines the Longinian experience of the linguistically rendered sublime where one feels as though one has authored the text one is reading, and the Kantian sublime whereby one assumes a “necessary liking” in aesthetic judgements.

As a whole, the natural landscape in *Frankenstein*, as with the natural landscape in *History*, is not some removed realm: through nature’s mediation in the eye of the observer, the world “becomes imbued with personality” as “the landscape is perceived in terms of its effect upon the travelers, its emotional power to instill awe and the sense of desolation it conveys.”²⁸ Likewise, Frankenstein’s retrospective structuring of his tale makes the existence of the Creature implicit, even from the tale’s beginnings in childhood; Frankenstein’s vision of the world is mediated through his terrifying creation: any obscure landscape hints at his possible return, and any desolate site in childhood points to the now-unavoidable future. Though the base of *Frankenstein*’s construction lies in the Shelleys’ travels across Europe and the Romantic genre of travel writing as a whole, the novel’s “peak” is embodied by the figure of the Creature, and how his presence influences the world at large. While the sublime of the Romantics appears to ascend the highest peaks and lead to a sense of the supersensible through this ascension, in *Frankenstein*

the sublime experience instead appears to remain muddled in obscurity: while there are short flashes of landscape description where Frankenstein can engage with his supersensible subjectivity, most of the description grounds the ascension and upwards ambition, pointing backwards to the Creature's embodied nature. There is a revisionary quality to *Frankenstein* as with other Romantic texts, whereby scenes and experiences from Victor's early childhood (such as the thunderstorm and the tree split by lightning) are revisited throughout the narrative's construction, building a complex embedded vision of his life. Fragments from Frankenstein's past, like the Creature, uncannily reappear as intimations of terror instead of remaining dead inside of the locked confines of the past. While in the work of William Wordsworth one gleans a sense of embedded time, this technique of embeddedness serves a growth narrative; on the other hand, when Frankenstein embeds images and episodes in his tales, he does not reference the growth of self, a sense of infinity that ultimately refers to a deity, or some elevation: he instead refers to an eternal return of the uncanny, his repressed creation. The Creature, much like embedded moments within Frankenstein's tale, returns without end. In the novel, one finds an "organization" of time much like the one described by Michael Serres in which:

time descends, turns back on itself, stops, starts, bifurcates ten times, divides, and blends, caught up in whirlpools and counter-currents, hesitant, aleatory, uncertain and fluctuating, multiplied into a thousand beds like the Yukon River. Sometimes time passes, sometimes not; but when it passes, it does so as if through a colander...this filter or percolator supplies the best model for the flow of time. Sudden explosions, quick crises, periods of stagnant boredom, burdensome or foolish regressions, and long blockages, but also rigorous linkages and suddenly accelerated progress, meet and blend in scientific time as in the intimacy of the soul, in meteorology as in river basins.²⁹

Like a colander, then, *Frankenstein* holds moments of time even as the course of the narrative passes through them; everything that passes is tinged with the past's remembrance by Frankenstein, but also by Captain Walton and the Creature.

Like this experience of embedded time in the novel, the notion of space likewise renders a sublime affect through a multivalent reading of setting, as heterotopic spaces—“other” spaces meant to be whole and set apart from normal space—are broken. The heterotopia, a concept of spatial power relations as defined by Michel Foucault, is both “a provocative way of combining material and metaphorical space” and “a *real* space that acts as a counter-site: it is ‘a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites...are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.’”³⁰ Like the sublime, movement is implicit within a heterotopic space as “it is...a site defined by process,” by “a sense of *movement* between the real and unreal.”³¹ Two important, traditionally heterotopic spaces pervade the novel: that of the graveyard (obliquely referred to through the Creature's composition), and that of the ship—the “heterotopia par excellence,” defined by Foucault as “a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea.”³² The heterotopias within Shelley's text never remain whole in themselves, and it is their fragmentary nature that leads to a sublime reading. For example, Captain Walton—in search of the North Pole upon a vessel—eventually gets stalled in ice, and Frankenstein—running from his Creature following Clerval's death—is still visited upon a vessel by his creation in nightmares. In the boat, Frankenstein finds himself in the grips of a nightmare where he “fe[els] the fiend's grasp on my neck,” only waking in a panic to realize “the dashing waves were around: the cloudy sky above; the fiend was not here.”³³ Although the boat exists as a space independent of the shore that Frankenstein departs and the place that Frankenstein sails towards, the Creature still

transcends the boundaries and breaks the boat's utopian construction. Unlike the Romantic poets who might marvel upon the "infinity of the sea," Frankenstein cannot experience such an elevation: instead, he is tethered to his creation, his immortal albatross.

Outside of the ship walled within it, the arctic itself could resemble a heterotopic space. Studying Shelley's use of the Arctic in *Frankenstein* in relation to imperial expansion, Jacob Bachinger notes the Arctic could be considered as a sort of "colonization project," (a recognized heterotopic space by Foucault) whereby the project's "exploration and discovery involve[s] 'forming another space, another real space.'"³⁴ Outside of the Arctic and ship, Bachinger also considers Frankenstein's laboratory, his hut in the Orkney's, the prison, and various rowboats within the book as heterotopic spaces.³⁵ In blending heterotopic spaces together—creating heterotopias that are "nested, and thus framed, by one another," as Bachinger argues—the embedded structure of the novel as a tale framed within an epistolary construct turns the ship "like those other heterotopias, the theatre and the cinema [into] a place that 'has the power of juxtaposing in a single real place different spaces and locations which may be incompatible with each other.'"³⁶

The heterotopic space of the graveyard, likewise, is shattered in the novel: the Creature is composed of parts from a space which inverts the cities of the living with the layout of the graves of the dead. While spaces of life and death are meant to juxtapose, the Creature uncomfortably navigates and transgresses these boundaries. The Creature precisely embodies the language of the uncanny, a theme defined in contrast to a "first burial" where something returns "that, in civilization [is] in a real sense out of place"; more than a haunting, the reanimation represents one "revisited by a power that was thought long dead."³⁷ The uncanny (the "*unheimlich*") is defined by Freud as "the name for everything that ought to have remained...secret and hidden

but has come to light.”³⁸ Dramatist Karl Ferdinand Gutzkow gives an apt metaphor for the uncanny in natural terms: it is like “a buried spring or a dried-up pond. One cannot walk over it without always having the feeling that the water might come up there again.”³⁹ Through his identification with Arctic and apocalyptic spaces, the Creature could amplify this sense of the uncanny through a metonymic comparison. For example, in contrast with humans, the Creature becomes identified metonymically with “the caves of ice, which I only do not fear” or with scenes where “Nature decayed around me, and the sun became heatless; rain and snow poured around me; mighty rivers were frozen; the surface of the earth was hard, and chill, and bare.”⁴⁰ Both landscapes that the Creature inhabits are apocalyptic in nature, and through reference to nature (and thereby time) progressing “around [him],” the Creature juxtaposes his persistence with the wasting of the terrain which he occupies. Ironically, in commenting on the beauty of the Swiss terrain that he and Victor pass through by boat, Henry Clerval compares the “harmony” of Switzerland to the spirits that “pile the glacier or retire to the inaccessible peaks of the mountain of our own country.”⁴¹ The comparison between the beautiful and the sublime landscapes is ironic, for the Creature trails the two figures, even in a paradisiacal land; their progression through the landscape by boat is temporary.

As a retrospective tale, all of Frankenstein’s references to landscape (even those of childhood) reflect the horrors he would endure in his later years, and the horrors that he would cause himself. While one could argue that the sublime rendered through imagery in Shelley’s text is largely natural in nature, this nature refers back to the Creature. Although for many Romantic authors nature is “the medium through which the mind discovers and presents itself, in eddies of separation and reunion”—a process clearly reflected in the narratives of Robert Walton, Frankenstein, and the Creature—in *Frankenstein* the figures don’t entirely ascend the

sensible realm, though they strive for the supersensible.⁴² In such landscapes, Thomas Weiskel argues that “the immeasurability of physical space” in the natural sublime is “linked to the infinitude of our supersensible faculty.”⁴³ In her passages concerning the landscape of the Arctic, Shelley’s writing clearly reflects this sense of the “immeasurable.” For example, when approaching the summit of Montanvert, Frankenstein describes the overbearing scenery that surrounds him in lyrical terms: “The abrupt sides of vast mountains were before me; the icy wall of the glacier overhung me...the solemn silence of this glorious presence-chamber of imperial Nature was broken only by the brawling waves....”⁴⁴ In this description of the scenery that Frankenstein finds before him, he deploys the metaphor of an imperial waiting-room to describe the Arctic landscape, a figure of speech which syntactically relates (and raises) the natural landscape to the level of the divine. The use of semi-colons and asyndeton to string-together the objects of Frankenstein’s vision serve to convey the immensity of the scene that surrounds him. Yet, at the same time, Frankenstein’s description of the scenery is rendered sublime through its proportional relation back to himself: in Frankenstein’s words, the mountains stand “before me”, and the glaciers “overh[a]ng me”. The sublime in this instance, then, is made possible for the reader—and for Frankenstein himself—through juxtaposition and scale. When describing the inner landscape that the outer one inspired, Frankenstein notes that the “sublime and magnificent scenes...elevated [him] from all littleness of feeling.”⁴⁵ Instead of making Frankenstein feel minuscule, the scenery around him (through his apprehension of it) instead causes him to feel “elevated.”

Other scenes that Frankenstein revisits from memory use this language of elevation: he notes, “I remembered the effect that the view of the tremendous and ever-moving glacier had produced upon my mind...It had then filled me with a sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the

soul, and allowed it to soar from the obscure world to light and joy.”⁴⁶ Through the metaphorical comparison of the sublime affect to a pair of wings, Shelley’s passage resembles Longinus’s sublime of transport. Interestingly, though, here Shelley associates light with a positive element, but as read throughout the text, the Promethean gift can also prove a Pandora’s box of ills. Though for the theorists the sublime isn’t present within natural objects but instead refers to the powers of the mind, for Shelley the light appears to take on the qualities of the sublime itself: it flashes forth like lightning, and its existence is temporary.

As David Ketterer argues in his book *Frankenstein’s Creation: The Book, The Monster, and Human Reality*, the use of metaphor in *Frankenstein* “involves a conjunction of the internal and the external” and blends Frankenstein’s presentation of his thoughts with his perceptions of the scenery around him.⁴⁷ This form of continual mediation in the text between Frankenstein and the world that surrounds him makes clear his role as a narrator, even as his narrative is supposedly delivered through Walton. For the grandiose thoughts they inspire within Frankenstein, Ketterer argues that Shelley’s combination of “Alpine and Arctic” scenery along with the “forces of magnetism, lightning, and electricity” together “[manifest]...transcendence.”⁴⁸ On their own, these respective forces and scenes of nature are natural—Ketterer argues that the main difference between the “picturesque” landscape and the sublime landscape is “a much enlarged order of reality”: an order unable to be scaled down by reason’s apprehension.⁴⁹

Borrowing a passage from *Frankenstein* that Ketterer himself considers, wherein Frankenstein first encounters his Creature when in the midst of joyfully appraising Mont Blanc’s summit, Frankenstein “[feels] a faintness seize [him]” and he “tremble[s] with...horror.”⁵⁰ Unlike the moments where Frankenstein regards the mountaintops and glaciers that surround him

with wonder, at the sight of his creation Frankenstein is stricken with terror, as his appearance signifies a threat of imminent danger—or so he thinks. While, according to Burke, a sense of suspension and terror can evoke the sublime (as it does for readers of Shelley’s text in this moment), on a textual level, the threat appears almost too pressing for him to engage with sublimity: there is no aesthetic distance between Frankenstein and his experience of terror. With this in mind, Ketterer’s central assertion that the Creature “is a personification of Burke’s natural sublime” and could thus be considered a “projection of the sensations inspired by the book’s Alpine environment” could be true in some instances, though not in those where Frankenstein’s life is directly threatened.⁵¹

For example, in the moment before lightning illuminates the Creature lurking in the trees, Frankenstein can sense something within the woods, and feels there is something near.⁵² In his description of the sublime, Burke favors this “obscurity” over the “clarity” that light provides as it “excites our passions.”⁵³ Burke’s concept of the sublime appears most latent in this moment of foreboding, of suspension, whereas Kant’s might be exemplified in the moment when the lightning flashes and Frankenstein can suddenly see his creation scaling the peaks of the mountain. Though, interestingly, Shelley associates the sublime with light and clear images, moments resound throughout the text where the sublime is revealed through ideations less definitive, less complete.

As much as Shelley’s engagement with the sublime is through the natural, she also involves passages that refer more directly to cognition. After meeting Frankenstein upon the boat, Walton writes in a letter to his sister of the effect that nature has upon Frankenstein: he observes,

“The starry sky, the sea, and every sight afforded by these wonderful regions, seems still to have the power of elevating his soul from earth. Such a man has a double existence: he may suffer misery, and be overwhelmed by disappointments; yet, when he has retired into himself, he will be like a celestial spirit that has a halo around him, within whose circle no grief or folly ventures.”⁵⁴

In considering the qualities that allow Frankenstein to appear “elevated” over Walton’s other companions, Walton considers Frankenstein’s “intuitive discernment; a quick but never-failing power of judgement; a penetration into the causes of things...add to this a facility of expression.”⁵⁵ While Walton’s own poetic description of Frankenstein’s nature appears again to evoke a duality, his assessment of Frankenstein’s mental abilities appears more Kantian in nature, as it highlights the ability of reason to consider things in proportion and judge. Through his mention of modes of expression, Walton also appears to reflect the focus that Longinus places on rhetorical delivery.

Symbolically speaking, in the above passage light appears as a sublime force, as destructive as it can be generative: it is lightning that smites the tree from Victor’s childhood and ignites the “spark of being” that awakens the Creature.⁵⁶ While this light exists on a natural level in the text within the moon, the monster, and the sky, it also exists on a metaphorical one: Frankenstein describes the conception of his idea as a burst of light: “from the midst of this darkness a sudden light broke in upon me—a light so brilliant and wondrous, yet so simple, that...I became dizzy with the immensity of the prospect.”⁵⁷ For Ketterer, the existence of this light is essential to Frankenstein, as he reads a sort of metonymy at work within the text: he finds “the blasted tree is to Frankenstein as the Alps are to the monster. In both cases, a being and an aspect of the external environment are confused.”⁵⁸ It is this “confusion” between the internal

and external that Ketterer distinguishes as a hallmark of the sublime in Shelley's text, as it blurs the lines between created and creator, observed and observer. This blurring of landscape and subjectivity is important in the text's use of retrospection. Ruminating on his inability to appreciate the beauty of Oxford with Clerval in his present mental state, Frankenstein remarks: "But I am a blasted tree; the bolt has entered my soul,"⁵⁹ mirroring the image of the "blasted stump" he saw in childhood.⁶⁰ In other instances, Frankenstein's inability to speak, to "give...expression to [his] sensations" that "weighed on [him] with a mountain's weight," the external landscape becomes internalized, rendering him as mute as he becomes when in the sights of the Creature.⁶¹

As the thought of creation once "dizzied" Frankenstein, by the end of the tale, Walton remarks: "I am yet dizzy with remembrance [of the monster standing over Frankenstein]."⁶² In describing the Creature as a being he cannot explain—"a form which I cannot find words to describe...uncouth and distorted in proportions," Captain Walton is stricken with a sense of terror that he experienced as a spectator at a second remove from Frankenstein's tale, but is finally able to experience for himself.⁶³ While existing, through various parts of the tale, as a spectator to Frankenstein's retrospection and a spectator to Walton's reactions to Frankenstein, the reader finally moves closer to the Creature through Walton's direct experience with him, but only as the Creature prepares to exit the text for good. Despite being titled "Frankenstein" and, for most of the plot, being considered as a presence and symbol that underlies both Frankenstein's and Walton's experiences, the Creature speaks the final lines of the tale, and the final image finds him jumping from the ship, "soon born away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance."⁶⁴ In this parting scene, the Creature becomes one with the landscape he inhabits, instilling the text with a sense of infinity, though the kind possible on earth. While Vidler, in

closing his examination of the uncanny, argues that “As a mental state, tied to the death of frustration of desire, the uncanny remained a threat to the high sublime,” within the text, the uncanny offers a particularly Gothic experience of the sublime as mediated through earthly forms rendered in a supernatural sort of light.⁶⁵ While *Frankenstein* may not exhibit the Wordsworthian notion of an infinite nature that espouses a communion with the divine, *Frankenstein* nonetheless offers—through its manipulation of space, time, and language—an infinity that suggests an eternal embedding of the past within the present, and of one’s creation within one as a creator.

Chapter IV: “We are the thing itself”:

Virginia Woolf and the Modernist Sublime in *The Waves*

In Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931), figures grapple with the passage of time compounded by the many fluctuations of existence in a disordered, modern world. The inner soliloquies of the text’s six voices—Bernard, Louis, Neville, Jinny, Susan, and Rhoda—concerning their lives and their absent friend, Percival, change tonally as the characters age, sectioned off by the metamorphoses of the motifs of the rising sun and the falling waves. As is the case with many of her texts, in *The Waves* Woolf “shift[s] emphasis away from the physical event, making it essentially either a part of history or of memory, transforming it from physical to mental reality.”¹ Though Woolf uses the “physical event” as a palpable staging for her characters’ numinous mental realities, she doesn’t negate its importance: the rhythms and happenings of city life punctuate the imagery, influence the embedding of memory, and encourage the linguistic and stylistic “oddities” of the text itself. In the same way that Woolf’s writing “oscillates between external and internal space, with the speed of express trains transformed into rhythms of the brain,” her use of the semi-colon and “alternating short and long clauses capture the motion and pauses of life in the city streets.”² Within these complicated physical and mental movements in the text a sense of affective ambivalence and elevation are implicit, but through the text’s use of the sensual world, one’s ability to subjectively supersede that realm is questioned; only through their access to the sensual world can characters “sink” into reflection.

Though in the Romantic and Gothic sublimes one’s mental movement is often characterized by elevation, in what I argue is a hallmark of the modernist sublime, Woolf operates using a language of verticality, but instead reverses it, an act reflective of the “surface-

depth model [that] is endemic throughout modernism.”³ As a whole, this chapter aims to study the development of the voices of Louis, Bernard, and Rhoda, as they exemplify the figure of the creator and uniquely define their identities in relief against others; against a city or place; and against one’s own past self, each remove increasing the feeling of alienation in which nothing is stabilized. The use of place, and its transformation into space, has influenced my choices in the “episodes” of the text. In the first “episode,” the figures occupy the garden of their childhood and through this define themselves against others. As they grow older and move to boarding school, the figures grow to define themselves against the city and a general public outside of their friend group. Finally, as they unite once more in their adult life, the figures further define themselves against their friends, the city, and themselves, now grown older. Though the characters continually return to memories and their own “moments of being” throughout the text, in the contexts of these specific settings, the moments carry the most resonance. This paper argues, as others do, that Woolf’s own creation of “moments of being” as a concept is “analogous with the sublime as a state of disequilibrium between habitual awareness and elevated consciousness,”⁴ or where “the particular takes on a more historical or transcendent resonance.”⁵ In *The Waves*, the uniquely modernist sublime relies on the use of space and setting, also an important factor for Shelley and Wordsworth, which builds upon a sense of the uncanny as place becomes space and the meanings are set loose.

As a literary movement, modernism began as a “troubled and fluctuating aesthetic response to conditions of modernity produced by a particular process of modernization.”⁶ Along with developments in psychological theories, spatial relations between an individual and the world they existed within changed as “vast stretches of space [were converted] into mere blips on the clock”: time and space were melded and compressed by the invention of modern modes of

transport.⁷ In modernist fiction, the workings of time and space are manipulated in the same way that divisions between the present and past and the sublime's supersensible and sensible divide are questioned. The movement's "'representational spaces' of the body or the psyche are reactions to the abstract and technologized 'representations of space' in modernity."⁸ Such technologized spaces were rendered increasingly uncanny and prominent by the events of the first World War.

Through the advent of World War I, the conceptions that earlier writers had formed of the world were challenged, especially as the War itself rent the "convention" of "'beauty outside' matching the mind within."⁹ The title of this article ("Broken mirrors: the first world war") emphasizes this point through the use of the Romantic motif of the mirror—World War I, like the budding study of psychoanalysis, fractured the external unity of the world. The fragmentation in modernist life, mind, and text mirrored that of the urban centers: the city could "generate states of shock, exhilaration, alienation, anonymity, confusion or thrill," its hallmark the "isolated, questioning self."¹⁰ The primary example of this questioning self is the modern literary figure of the *flâneur*, a term coined and defined by Charles Baudelaire as "'a kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness."¹¹ Exemplified by characters such as Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, the *flâneur*—traditionally a male figure—wandered the city and filtered the physical world through his mental sieve. The mental realms of these singular characters contrasted with those of the imagistic crowds traipsing the city streets with an "anonymity and uniformity suggest[ing] an automatism verging on the uncanny," a factor noted through their self-conscious identification apart from the crowd.¹² In *The Waves*, many—if not all—of the voices could be considered *flâneurs* through their interaction with space, including the women. Though the embedded

thoughts and memories connect the voices across the text, spaces separate them, and the soliloquies are often delivered alone.

Borrowing the metaphorical image of the fish in the stream used to describe one's life from *Moments of Being*, I will briefly "describe the stream" of modern fiction before analyzing the texts that flow within it. Much in the same way that one cannot "know...the subject of the memoir" if one "cannot analyze the invisible presences" (here taken to be the societal shifts between decades, and the changes in class systems), Woolf's language can be extrapolated and applied to the "invisible presences" that impact fictional works; through doing so, one can better appreciate the works for their surroundings.¹³ Though Woolf posits that "down in the plain little is visible"—that periodization is for the literary historian and that writers can't recognize the change—the existence of the essay "Modern Fiction" itself recognizes certain shifts in literary custom, such as the propensity of the moderns to write about "the dark places of psychology."¹⁴ The figurative language that circumscribes modern literature is loose: where the constructed realist novel is tyrannical, the modern fictional world is filled with impressions in the nature of an "incessant shower of innumerable atoms."¹⁵ The figurative language that Woolf uses here of the "innumerable atoms," or later of the "uncircumscribed spirit," convey both an extreme littleness of scale (an idea familiar to Burke) and a sense of boundlessness; the sense continues into Woolf's assertion that "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."¹⁶ The essay also couches the division between the moderns and earlier writers through the use of a material and spiritual division: contrasting the work of those such as James Joyce against the "materialist" authors of the past, Woolf defines Joyce as "spiritual" for his concern with "reveal[ing] the flickering of that innermost flame which flashes its messages

through the brain” through his “sudden lightning flashes of significance.”¹⁷ The language used to describe modern fiction in the essay mirrors the nature-ridden imagery used by Longinus, Kant, and Burke to exemplify the sublime affect. The focus on the temporality of the language (lightning, flashes) especially evokes both the Longinian sublime moment and the temporal discontinuity of the cities within which many modern works were set.

Though the modernization of society certainly impacted the modernist movement and gave the modernist sublime its special concerns with space and time, Woolf’s use of the external world to convey sublimity finds its roots in earlier works of fiction, namely—and surprisingly—within two Victorian authors. While the Victorian age itself was known for its repressive atmosphere and stalwart morality (as Woolf herself would note of her upbringing in her personal writings), its authors could be anything but conventional. In her essay “On *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*,” Woolf notes the inventive nature of the texts and their use of psychological and supernatural themes that were as groundbreaking for their time as Mary Shelley’s Gothic elements were for the Romantic period. Within the works of the two Bronte sisters, Woolf notes qualities that she would later identify as attributes of modern fiction: the novels possess “some untamed ferocity perpetually at war with the accepted order of things,” “intolerant” of the “restrictions” of prose.¹⁸ Setting is likewise used by these two authors in a way that precedes its use by Woolf, as both authors “are always invoking the help of nature. They both feel the need of some more powerful symbol of the vast and slumbering passions in human nature than words or actions can convey.”¹⁹ If, as Woolf surmises, Charlotte Bronte “calls on nature to describe a state of mind which could not otherwise be expressed,” she anticipates through her fiction a technique common to the modernists. As such, settings involving “their storms, their moors...are not ornaments applied to decorate a dull page or display the writer’s power of observation—they

carry on the emotion and light up the meaning of the book.”²⁰ While both Wordsworth and Shelley also use magnificent natural scenes and landscapes to illustrate thematic elements, the Brontes and Woolf use landscape in another way. The works of Wordsworth and Shelley involve Romantic tours and the movement of setting in the text makes sense, whereas the descriptions of the Brontes and Woolf give a sense of a conjoined internally and externally haunted space. While they used supernatural images, the sense of the supernatural in the Brontes gives a sense of the uncanny. In her 1918 essay “The Supernatural in Fiction,” Woolf studies the role of the governess in “The Turn of the Screw,” noting that she “is not so much frightened of them as of the sudden extension of her own field of perception...the horror of the story comes from the force with which it makes us realize the power that our minds possess for such excursions into the darkness; when certain lights sink or certain barriers are lowered, the ghosts of the mind, untracked desires, indistinct intimations, are seen to be a large company.”²¹ It is these senses of haunting and expansion, hinted at in Shelley’s text, that are carried into the works of the Brontes and Woolf through the use and study of space.

If one were to examine Woolf’s treatment of modern London against the Romantics’ experiences of their pastoral tours, the differences in their treatments of place and space would become clear. Travel, especially within a city as voracious as London, for Wordsworth became something of an unpleasant interaction with the mathematical sublime itself; his interactions with an explicitly natural sublime appear more positive, on the other hand. While Woolf’s treatment of London can be ambivalent depending on the voice, the characters tend not to express a great disdain for modern life in the cities. Wordsworth writes of London as “modeled on the epic conventions of the descent into the underworld...a kind of hell of the imagination, where an intense and often horrific overload of sensory input challenges the poet’s powers of

understanding and meaning-making.”²² In the city, there is no silence to create from: instead, a cacophony rends any ability to distinguish “man from man, high from low... Wordsworth’s lyric poetry from the ‘Babel din’ of other discourses.”²³ The Wordsworthian terror of the city here reflects Burke’s examination of the sublime in terms of relativity and one’s ability to distinguish between objects proportionately. This wholly negative appraisal of city life contrasts with those of the voices of *The Waves* who appear to possess what poet John Keats called “negative capability”—the ability of a poet to exist ““in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”” that allows one to “dwell in a state of openness to all experience and identify with the object contemplated.”²⁴ In Woolf, the eye and indefinite “I” alike float within the flux of the city; Wordsworth would seem to prefer the stability of memory and solitary landscapes.

The exploration of “flow” will further clarify the difference between Wordsworth and Woolf in terms of their construction of the past. For both figures, “the meaning unfolds after the experience” and the use of memory in Woolf’s moments of being “brings out her affinity with Wordsworth specifically with his emphasis on ‘emotion recollected in tranquility.’”²⁵ At the same time, Wordsworth’s retrospection appears to rely upon a more stable chain of thoughts—of the ability to form an “I”—whereas Woolf’s appears scattered, interrupted, and developed throughout the course of the text. For example, in her story “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” (1930), Woolf considers whether the “true” self is the one who dreams or the one settled in the present moment, questioning: “Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves? Circumstances compel unity; for convenience sake a man must be a whole.”²⁶ The passage suggests that, instead of

focusing on the “truth” of either the present self or the past self, one ought to search for “truth” in how the self navigates between the two; that one ought to search for sublimity in embedded movement. In this process, the use of memory “test[s] the enduring quality of the moment of being” and it “extend[s] the dimensions of the moment.”²⁷ In the same way that language factors into the endurance of the sublime within the minds of its readers (according to Longinus), memory becomes a test for the reader and character alike on the spectatorial and experiential levels.

In her own language, Woolf wrote of what she would later name “moments of being” in her collection of “sketches,” *Moments of Being*, written across her life and published posthumously in 1972. In Woolf’s stories and memoirs in this text, “the past, on which the identity of the present moment rests, is never static, never fixed like a fly in amber, but as subject to alteration as the consciousness that recalls it.”²⁸ Each time a past moment is called to mind, it is undoubtedly changed for both reader and character, as it resonates throughout a text. Each moment depends upon a dialogue between the present and the past, transforming the present into a “platform to stand upon” to render a difference between the “I now, I then.”²⁹ Though Woolf argues that in moments of being one transcends the self and that “individual consciousness becomes an undifferentiated part of a greater whole,” even if the self is transcended within a singular moment, Woolf’s *The Waves* is structured by many moments: transcendence is proved to be temporary through the characters’ “transcending” of one nest for another.³⁰ The moment also appears to unfold in two parts: beginning first as an act of “recognition,” the moment then transforms into one of “revelation”—in recognition an object stands out, in revelation it transcends.³¹ As a whole, though, a strong enough “emotion” must influence the initial act of recognition: “strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we

can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start.”³² As with Wordsworth’s powerful emotions recollected in tranquility, Woolf’s reflections involve both the retrospection and powerful emotional pull. Compared to Wordsworth’s construction of the “I,” Woolf here figures herself as “only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture”: she places more import on the variegation of the emotional experience than a cohered construction of the self.³³ As a whole, Woolf’s use of the past appears like her image of “lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow”: it is something translucent, permeable, and able to endow sketches with swathes and swatches of color.³⁴ The double-pronged moments of recognition and revelation are filtered through this light of the past and compare to Kant’s division of the sensible and supersensible: each cannot occur without its most base form.

The way in which Woolf’s moments most mirror the notions of Longinus and Kant, though, is through their positioning within the framework of a collapse and a subsequent recuperation: the imagination and the self collapse under the pressure of the moment, but the conviction that a pattern lies behind each moment occurs as a recuperative force. Just as the moments of being are embedded within *The Waves* and *Moments*, in life Woolf remarks that the moments are “embedded in many more moments of non-being...embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool.”³⁵ The moments of being and non-being then construct a binary relationship whereby the transparency of being contrasts with the stolidity of the “cotton wool,” of the conscious without recognition. The three pivotal moments to which Woolf brings the readers’ attention in her essay “Sketches of the Past” are violent, not so much in nature but by the force of their stimulation and recognition: they include a fight with her brother Toby, an epiphany concerning a flower, and her reaction to a family friend committing suicide—in her

life, these moments “come to the surface unexpectedly,” arising from the depths.³⁶ The language of the moments “resurfacing” engages with the Modernist surface-depth model discussed earlier and engages with the theorization of the sublime through a language of verticality. In addition to their reappearance from the depths (perhaps also a symbol the uncanny), the moments for Woolf “[bring] with them a peculiar horror and a physical collapse; they [seem] dominant; myself passive...one has a greater power through reason to provide an explanation...this explanation blunts the sledge-hammer force of its blow.”³⁷ Together, the language of collapse and then reason’s shielding from the force of this collapse echo both the Longinian and Kantian sublimities and their affective ambivalence. In her experience with “violent” moments of being, the “collapse” occurs “as if I were passive under some sledge-hammer blow; exposed to a whole avalanche of meaning that had heaped itself up and discharged itself upon me, unprotected, with nothing to ward it off.”³⁸ The increasingly figurative, violent depiction of these moments of being reflects the violence implicit within Longinus and reflects the Kantian ambivalence of the experience.

Through a creative engagement with these moments, the initial blow softens and “become[s] a revelation of some order” and she discovers the “hidden pattern” resting “behind the cotton wool.”³⁹ In writing, Woolf constructs a sense of sublime recuperation for herself, and finds “a great delight to put the severed parts together.”⁴⁰ In this Frankensteinian act of construction (“putting [the shock] into words...I make it whole”), Woolf yet elides the cohesion of the self-as-creator: she calls “Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet...the truth about this vast mass we call the world,” though remarks that there is no separate creator: “no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.”⁴¹ The creator is implicit in his creation, as Frankenstein is in his Creature,

and as Woolf is in the creation of her scenes. While Woolf experiences her moments of being as “moments,” for the reader—and within her texts—they appear as scenes: as her “natural way of marking the past,” Woolf writes “it will not stand argument—that we are sealed vessels afloat upon what it is convenient to call reality; at some moments, without a reason, without an effort, the inner sealing matter cracks; in floods reality; that is a scene.”⁴² Through identifying one’s existence with a flooding ship, Woolf breaks a symbolically heterotopic space much like Shelley does in *Frankenstein*: a moment, much like a creator, cannot remain entire of itself. As in *Frankenstein*, aspects of the outward landscape are internalized, bear upon, and construct the notion of one’s communion with the self: the horizon changes in writing “from being a purely visible element in nature to a more inward sphere of unknowability.”⁴³ Alongside this pivotal image of the horizon, images of the waves and modern technology do much the same to bear upon subjectivity.

In considering the sublime within Virginia Woolf’s “playpoem” of *The Waves*, I will consider the characters Louis, Bernard, and Rhoda in particular who—through their status as “outsiders” and their focus on creation—bear a distinctive imprint of the world and words. Percival, as the only character who does not speak but is constructed by all, is also implicit in this. While the other voices of Jinny, Susan, and Neville are riveting for how they react with the world (Jinny is engaged with the corporality of her existence, Susan with the earth and countryside as a presence, and Neville with finding love), through the other characters’ direct aims to construct (Louis’s ceaseless attempts to create phrases, Bernard’s attempts at linguistic cohesion, and Rhoda’s engagement with a dream world) they bear the imprint of visionaries impacted by modern life, and reflect Woolf’s subjectivity as an artist. In considering the engagement of these characters with the sublime, I will also be comparing them to the creator-

created dynamic in Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. In my analysis, I will refer to Ida Klitgård's enumeration of the two correlative "tracks" of *The Waves*: the "interludes" of descriptive nature scenes and the "episodes" of the voices, including the comparison of the first interlude of sunrise to the first episode of childhood; midmorning to early adolescence; late morning to adolescence; midday to adulthood; noon to the death of Percival; early afternoon to adulthood; late afternoon to maturity; evening to old age; night to death; and the cycle begins again in interlude ten.⁴⁴

In the opening pages of *The Waves*, the reader does not get a sense of the technological Modernist sublime, but instead receives a sense of the Modernist sublime through the structure of the text. In the beginning, the children play in some empyrean garden before their lessons. After the initial interlude of the sun rising, the voices speak directly of what "I see" or "I hear"—Bernard, the first to speak, remarks "I see a ring...hanging above me." Gradually, their direct vision shifts to more figurative and indirect modes of representation: Louis sees "A shadow [fall] on the path...like an elbow bent" and Rhoda notes that "Islands of light are swimming on the grass."⁴⁵ In these two instances, Louis and Rhoda use a creative language of approximation through their respective simile and metaphor. While the six voices all view and study the same scene, they do so impressionistically, noting vastly different things that reflect back on their selves: the traipsing eye reflects the "I" that it belongs to. In the first lengthy monologic section, Louis desires to "be unseen" and imagines himself as a tree: "I hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world, through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver. I am all fibre." "Up here," Louis describes his eyes as "green leaves, unseeing" compared to "down there" where his eyes "are the lidless eyes of a stone figure in a desert by the Nile."⁴⁶ There is a connection for Louis, as with Rhoda and Bernard, to other

imagined realms, a juxtaposition between a world that requires he “come to the top and say [his] lesson” away from the world of the roots.⁴⁷ The roots exist as Louis’s symbol for being, compared to the non-being, non-seeing of the world “up there.”

In comparison to Louis, Bernard’s first monologue begins with a vision of other people: he notes, “Susan has passed us,” and follows Susan into the forest. In this obscure space, Susan and Bernard travel (together, notably, not alone) to “Elvedon”: Bernard notes, “We shall sink like swimmers just touching the ground with the tips of their toes.” Even in this imaginatively reconstructed space of the stables, Susan differentiates herself from Bernard and recognizes their existence on two different levels, noting: “I am tied down with single words...you rise up higher, with words.”⁴⁸ Bernard experiences life as he does when he falls asleep, with “a film of water drawn over [his] eyes by a wave”: he sinks into the lives of others in order to depict them, hearing “through” the waves “far off, far away, faint and far, the chorus beginning; wheels; dogs; men shouting; church bells; the chorus beginning.”⁴⁹ Only through his ability to sink and descend beneath the surface can Bernard imagine the possibility of other lives.

Unlike the two boys, Rhoda’s first monologue begins not with people, but with a scene of her own construction: placing petals on the surface of a pond to create ships, Rhoda notes: “All my ships are white.” These constructed boats become symbolic of the six figures, as some will “founder” or “dash themselves against the cliffs,” while for Rhoda “One sails alone. That is my ship. It sails into icy caverns where the sea-bear barks and the stalactites swing green chains...my ship which mounts the wave and sweeps before the gale and reaches the islands where the parrots chatter and the creepers....”⁵⁰ The ellipsis, included within Woolf’s text, is significant: it either cuts short Rhoda’s vision, or depicts it as trailing onwards, unfinished and indefinite. If one hearkens back to the image of the flooding ship that Woolf evokes in *Moments*

of *Being*,⁵¹ it is significant that Rhoda's ship is the lone vessel to reach the mystical island, untouched by the water of reality. Notably, Rhoda ventures via her petal ship into the heterotopic arctic, a place where reality—symbolized via the water—is frozen in time. In another instance, after being left alone in a classroom to face her inability to solve a math problem, Rhoda finds that: "The figures mean nothing now. Meaning has gone. The clock ticks. The two hands are convoys marching through a desert."⁵² The emptiness of the figures on the page leads to a scene where the clock hands become two explorers and she fills the empty world with her own visions. Though Rhoda drifts into her vision of the figures to create meaning (and thus has a slight sense of control), before she falls asleep, she must "touch the rail at the end of the bed" so she can "hang suspended" and allow her "mind [to] pour." In this state, Rhoda becomes subsumed by her visions as they "heap themselves on [her]" and operate as an overwhelming force.⁵³ In comparing the initial visions of Louis, Bernard, and Rhoda, one becomes conscious of the different ways in which they interact with the world imaginatively (through attempting to root oneself in the world; through capturing the world with words; through getting lost in singular visions). The creations that the three voices forge in the garden in childhood are peppered throughout the remainder of the text as their central visions. Childhood, defined by Woolf in *Moments of Being* as "that great Cathedral space," gives a hint to the degree of import and reverence that she bestowed upon the time.⁵⁴ In expanding upon this notion of the Cathedral as Woolf does with St. Paul's Cathedral in *The London Scene*, one can glean a reading of childhood as a place of Longinian transport and transformation, where miracles are shrouded:

Here it is again, looming over us, mountainous, immense, greyer, colder, quieter than before. And directly we enter we undergo that pause and expansion and release from hurry and effort which it is in the power of St. Paul's, more than any other building in the

world, to bestow...Mind and body seem both to widen in this enclosure, to expand under this huge canopy where the light is neither daylight nor lamplight, but an ambiguous element something between the two.⁵⁵

In the next episode, “midmorning,” Louis introduces London for the first time by remarking “London crumbles. London heaves and surges,” noting repetitiously how things exist “there.” Through his straightforward description of the city in “there” statements, Louis maps out the city on an impersonal level and shows that he has not yet interpolated the rhythms of the city or of modern transport.⁵⁶ Likewise, as Bernard leaves home he resolves himself to “make phrases and phrases and so interpose something hard between myself and the stare of housemaids, the stare of clocks, staring faces, indifferent faces, or I shall cry.”⁵⁷ Bernard seeks to distance himself from his surroundings and against a sense of the mathematical sublime: the repetition of “stare” and “face” gives the lines a sense of anonymous infinitude. In her early experiences of school, Rhoda finds herself with “no face” amongst the other children, and fears for a sense of her self-preservation.⁵⁸ Compared to the modern anxieties surrounding the crowds, the connection that the figures express when reunited with the original group of six appears more hopeful and prefigures the later scene of the “last supper.” As the group sits in a circle on the grass prior to their summer holidays, Louis aims to “fix the moment in one effort of supreme endeavor...my shattered mind is pierced together by some sudden perception. I take the trees, the clouds, to be witnesses of my complete integration. I, Louis, I, who shall walk the earth these seventy years, am born entire, out of hatred, out of discord.” Though, in this moment of being, Louis undergoes both recognition and revelation, his sense of self and his “integration” with the world appear short-lived: he witnesses his vision “for a second” before Percival runs off and ruins it.⁵⁹ Juxtaposing with the supposed stability of Louis’s vision, Rhoda’s conclusion establishes that the

world of the others “is the real world. The things they lift are heavy,” whereas her own world constantly “shift[s] and change[s].”⁶⁰ Much in the same way that some argue that “the modernist sublime is contingent on the instability of relativity,” the voices throughout the text interact in a destabilized relationship with each other, the crowd, and the city.⁶¹ Though their degrees of attachment shift as the text progresses, if the moments of being of Louis, Bernard, and Rhoda serve as any guides, Louis attempts to delve into the roots of the world; Bernard tries to distance himself from the horrors of the crowd through creating phrases; and Rhoda attempts to construct and inhabit another dream world in which to persist.

In their leaving school for summer holidays, the voices each react differently to travel, expanding upon their initial reactions to travel in the second episode. “As the train passes,” Rhoda reflects upon her cohered experiences of the past, a remembrance only available to her as she leaves the land behind: she reminisces, “Wind and storm colored July. Also, in the middle, cadaverous, awful, lay the grey puddle in the courtyard...I could not cross it. Identity failed me.”⁶² The space of the puddle—one of Woolf’s own moments of being from “A Sketch of the Past”—invades Rhoda’s retrospection as a “cadaverous” force, alongside the sublime motifs of the wind and storm. While the wind and storm derive their sense of sublimity from their ability to overwhelm in the sense of the Kantian dynamic sublime, the puddle’s very stillness lends it to a different sort of reading: that of the uncanny, where one is greeted with a reflection of something one would rather forget. There is also an embedded sense of the sublime here, as the train (another heterotopia) travels through space and yet opens within it thoughts of the stalled puddle. In comparison, when Louis and Bernard board the train they appear more indefinite. Louis notes the perplexity of space within the train, as he remarks: “Now I hang suspended without attachments. We are nowhere. We are passing through England in a train.”⁶³ Even

Bernard, who typically uses phrases to separate himself from others, finds that his “words at once make smoke rings” on the car.⁶⁴ Through its compression of time and space, modern modes of transport such as the train create heterotopic spaces whereby “its discursive (verbalized, dreamed, or walked) development is organized as a relation between the *place* from which it proceeds (an origin) and the nowhere it produces (a way of ‘going by’).”⁶⁵ The instability of spatial movement is likewise increasingly mirrored in the text’s scenic interludes, as shadows grow behind their more stolid counterparts: “Chairs and cupboards loomed behind so that though each was separate they seemed inextricably involved... The real flower on the window-sill was attended by a phantom flower. Yet the phantom was part of the flower for when a bud broke free, the paler flower in the glass opened a bud too.”⁶⁶ In this domestic scene that reflects the progression of the day, the waves, and the voices, both past and present are rendered unstable.

Outside of the typical constraints of temporality, the voices struggle against the constraints of the externally defined self. For example, after meeting with Neville Bernard feels “returning from the dark corners in which they took refuge, those shabby inmates, those familiars... with their addition I am Bernard; I am Byron; I am this, that and the other.”⁶⁷ While Bernard’s interactions with others require a gathered self, in his solitude these other “‘unborn selves’” appear from the woodwork—uncanny specters who, as “‘fragments of foregone potential’” haunt him in their “‘possibility.’”⁶⁸ In constructing this complicated notion of selfhood, Woolf forms a mathematically sublime notion of self where the infinitude of one’s potential haunts one alongside that which one has done.

In his experiences within the city, Louis’s thoughts are interrupted by the rhythms of ordinary life, as people “pass the window of this eating-shop incessantly. Motor-cars, vans, motor-omnibuses; and again motor-omnibuses, vans, motor-cars—they pass the window... Yet I

cannot (They go on passing, they go on passing in disorderly procession).” The repetitious, chiasmic phrasing that tracks the passage of the motor vehicles shows the impact they have upon Louis, and the use of a parenthetical within his own soliloquy demonstrates a sense of division. This sense of disorder makes itself more prominent linguistically as it unfolds into Louis’s awareness “of flux; of disorder; of annihilation and despair,” though even this unfurling is countered by the “rhythm of the eating-house” and his assertion that “I will reduce you to order.” In contrast to the apocalyptically sublime vision of the crowd, Louis attempts to evoke his primary moment of being from childhood, declaring: “My roots go down through veins of lead and silver, through damp, marshy places.” At the same time, the moment’s embedding within the present leaves it susceptible to transformation: even with his senses imaginatively masked, Louis has “yet heard rumors of wars; and the nightingale; have felt the hurrying of many troops of men flocking hither and thither in quest of civilization.” Louis, borrowing the image of the tree from his past, utilizes it to create a dialogue between his disengagement with his childhood friends in the garden and his current desire to remove himself from the despairing world. In his consideration of his current surroundings, Louis links images of the eating-house with those of the infinite: “I see the gleaming tea-urn; the glass cases full of pale-yellow sandwiches; the men in round coats perched on stools at the counter; and also behind them, eternity.”⁶⁹ In this marvelous sentence, Woolf chains together these images through the use of semi-colons and displays the monotony of the scene against which Louis wishes to define himself.

Like Louis, in the episode Rhoda is caught up in her struggles to remain herself. Standing inside a room at a dinner party, Rhoda observes: “The door opens; the light leaps. The door opens; terror rushes in; terror upon terror, pursuing me,” interspersed with her desires to see “the swallow dip her wing in dark pools.” In this experience of the seemingly Burkean sublime,

Rhoda is “broken into separate pieces; [she] is no longer one” due to her terror and the expectations of others. By the end of the episode, Rhoda recognizes herself in “the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims the rocks with whiteness; I am also a girl, here in this room”: she occupies both her creative vision and the position that is socially expected of her.⁷⁰ In the same way that de Certeau uses the image of the colander to describe the order of the surface of the city “punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning...a sieve-order,” the distinctions between Rhoda (as recognized externally) and Rhoda (as she envisions herself) are jostled within this fictional sieve.⁷¹

In particular, two episodes within the text oriented around figurative Last Suppers make use of symbolic shorthands for the sublime. In his chapter “Sacramental Imagination: Eucharists of the Ordinary Universe in the Works of Joyce, Proust, and Woolf,” Richard Kearney uses the religious tenet of transubstantiation to explore “sacramental” aspects of modernist texts such as Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. While it doesn’t examine spiritual themes outright, Thomas Weiskel’s *The Romantic Sublime* explores variations on the Romantic sublime that, like Kearney’s transubstantial sublime, evoke a rooted transcendence. Together, Kearney’s and Weiskel’s ideas concerning the sublime position themselves in a liminal place that hovers between two movements without situating themselves firmly in either one. In the imagistic scene that precedes the “Last Supper” between the friends and Percival, loose tenants of the natural landscape (the personified birds, the sun, and the ocean) juxtapose with more banal, quotidian accoutrements (like the utensils and table-settings). The elevating, ephemeral movements of the natural transform the stolid elements of the mundane through the Last Supper as, for example, “whatever the light touched became dowered with fanatical existence. A plate was like a white lake.”⁷² While, in his chapter, Kearney writes of Woolf’s use of “eucharistic vision” in Mrs.

Ramsay's "strange and enduring" dinner in *To the Lighthouse*, the equally strange and enduring moments of *The Waves* (such as the dinner parties) warrant consideration as well.⁷³ Considering the "sublimity" within *The Waves* in transubstantial terms is apt because of how it functions within the text: while in most literature one accesses sublime judgment through transport *from* the mundane, in Woolf the sublime transports one *through* interaction with the mundane. While the works of those such as Wordsworth and Shelley require the motifs of a perilous mountain, a thunderstorm, or arctic tundra (and Woolf herself does make use of some of these motifs in places) to transport one, as a whole Woolf's landscape doesn't require their use: she infuses the mundane with a sense of the ephemeral infinite in other ways.

Through the multivalency of the novel's complex perspectivism, Woolf engages with the language of the sublime in her text. In the first dinner scene, the aggrandizement of a carnation exemplifies the mental struggle to comprehend the infinite. As Bernard observes, "There is a red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now [after Percival has arrived] a seven-sided flower, many-petalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves—a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution."⁷⁴ In a miracle of loaves and fish, the flower is simultaneously divided and multiplied (figuratively) by Percival's arrival. The carnation offers a transformation that isn't so much sublime in itself as it is for what it purports: that every object, for every person, could be so multiplied. While the imagination struggles to extend this image to infinity and imagine such a flower, reason engages with the boundlessness of the idea and comprehends the expansion. While such conjectures could be made by the reader, the carnation could also be read as an example of Weiskel's "egotistical sublime," where "the sudden 'movement' of the mind is greatly slowed and the phenomenal or sensible ego is aggrandized in place of the self-recognition of the noumenal reason."⁷⁵ As much

as the sublime judgement relies upon movement, in Woolf this movement stalls and hovers in places to render an expanded effect.

Outside of Woolf's unique monologic blending within the text, her use of perspective is intriguing for how it meshes together the visible and mental realms. While laying out the theoretical framework that he uses to examine the work of Joyce, Proust, and Woolf, Kearney quotes the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty who notes the inseparable relationship between the observer and the observed: "the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen."⁷⁶ Kearney, in turn, labels this model "chiasmic" in the sense that it enacts "a mutual transubstantiation of the seer and the seen."⁷⁷ The ways in which Woolf's characters interact with the world and move between contemplation of an item (such as the carnation) to rumination reflect Kearney's transubstantial concept; the wave-like flow of the text and the character's lives resembles an unstable, wave-like exchange between oneself and the physical world. The practice mirrors what Kearney calls the "reversibility of upper and lower case 'It/it,'" as the text encourages a "transubstantiation of the higher into the lower, the extraordinary into the ordinary, transcendence into immanence."⁷⁸ As the dinner scene progresses, the dynamic between transcendence and immanence becomes more complicated as the voices hover in expectancy.

While Neville anxiously awaits Percival's arrival at the dinner table, he imagines the "extraordinary transformation" that Percival will enact wherein "the normal is abolished" and "things have lost their normal uses." In these moments where Percival isn't yet physically with them, Neville experiences the world on the brink, noting how "things quiver as if not yet in being" and how Percival endows the space with "this intensity of being." But the experience is short-lived: when Percival arrives in body, Neville rejoices: "All oppression is relieved...The

reign of chaos is over. He has imposed order. Knives cut again.”⁷⁹ The flow of the prose itself juxtaposes Neville’s state of anticipation with his certainty: the lines prior are more fluid, languid; the ones following are clipped, single sentences. Like the radiance of the sun in the preceding descriptive passage that transforms the silverware and the room, Neville’s anticipation ignites disorder and makes ordinary objects and rooms feel alien, unfamiliar. When Percival arrives, he—like the sun in decline—gives depth to the meeting and attaches shadows to the light in “many-pleated folds”, weighing it down.⁸⁰ As infinity, possibility, are reduced to certainty, the imagery is domineered by the physical world and the imagination takes direct hold.

As with the multifaceted structure of the carnation that grows at the beginning of the meal, by the end of the meal the members of the group find themselves with a bond “that globes itself here”—a formation whose dissolution they protest against. While the globe—something cohered, un-fractured—appears whole, the enumeration upon its constituent parts seemingly rends any attempt at true, lasting unity. Percival, as a Christ-figure, unites the group “for one moment” through his Last Supper with this intangible globe, “whose walls are made of Percival, of youth and beauty, and something so deep sunk within us that we shall perhaps never make this moment out of one man again.” In a transubstantial sense, Percival gives himself to the moment as much as the moment builds upon his identity, especially as the characters reminisce over him in his eventual absence. Having reached its zenith, as the friends begin to elaborate on what they envision, their differences become clearer: within this globe, opposing elements are only nominally reconciled, including Rhoda’s “forests and far countries...and moonlight falling upon some high peak where the eagle soars” and Neville’s “quiet of ordinary things.”⁸¹ While the imagination struggles to unite the two realms together, the supersensible can cohere them as one: as Weiskel observes, part of the supersensible’s sublimity amongst scenes such as Rhoda’s

includes one's ability to feel that the boundlessness of a scene is "simultaneously *there*, coexisting with us; we *think (denken)* a realm of existence that we are unable to *cognize (erkennen)*."⁸² The ability to "think" this "realm of existence" resembles one's supersensible ability to gather a sense of order from disparate moments.

In contrast to the certainties of existence, the voices each struggle separately with the elusive nature of order. Rhoda bemoans her inability to compress moments into a larger context, wallowing: "I cannot make one moment merge into the next. To me they are all violent, all separate."⁸³ Likewise, Louis worries about how to produce a summation or a sense of order, wondering: "How can I reduce these dazzling, these dancing apparitions to one line capable of linking all in one?"⁸⁴ While the Kantian sublime could posit a sense of order through the supersensible's ability to think as a whole what the imagination cannot apprehend, within her text Woolf doesn't suggest a sublime that is wholly Kantian in nature. Instead of moving forward to what Weiskel calls the "self-recognition of the noumenal reason," the voices instead appear to pause and mull within their stalled state.⁸⁵

As with Neville's wait for Percival, the characters most experience the sublime notion of their existence when it is indefinite, indeterminate—when all still appears hazy around the edges. The text favors nebulosity: from Woolf's use of free indirect discourse to string together the monologic thoughts of her characters to "spatio-temporal" changes that keep one's sense of self in flux, a sense of deliberate suspension pervades the text.⁸⁶ Favoring an expansive doubt over a manufactured selfhood that divides one from the world that one observes, Woolf notes the fissures of modern identity and existence. In one scene, Bernard's expansive sense of continuity is broken when he observes: "It steals in through some crack in the structure—one's identity. I am not part of the street—no, I observe the street. One splits off, therefore."⁸⁷ Bernard seems to

display a degree of displeasure at his realization, a displeasure which resembles what Weiskel notes as an “odd sense of diminishment as perception contracts to identity.”⁸⁸ Likewise, Neville fights against any attempt at solidification, decrying pronouncements such as “‘I am this; I am that!’” as “false sayings.”⁸⁹ Any attempt to proclaim the recognition of an identity, an “I,” that is detached from the ordinary world around it appears a farce to figures such as Bernard and Neville. Thus, the sublime as it functions in Woolf appears akin to how Weiskel views its function in Wordsworth: it “locates aesthetic greatness more precisely in the unconscious apotheosis of sense than in the consequent state of recognition.”⁹⁰

While Woolf does use the language of revelation and epiphany within her text that could be read as recognition, her use is far from totalizing: such revelatory moments are scattered throughout, as the certainty of their truths are metered by the progression of the years. Within *The Waves*, then, one observes a prioritization of the moments of being that both precede and rest within the transubstantial “apotheosis of sense.”

Coda: “In the stillness between two waves of the sea”

Having mapped conceptual inflections of the sublime onto the creative works of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Woolf, I have found through this paper that common factors unite, yet distinguish, the creative works’ interaction with the sublime. While all three writers, within their respective texts, use motifs of movement and travel, reflect upon past selves, and contemplate the role of self as a creator, they each engage with these factors to a varying extent. They share the common notion that the reader—much like the figures within each work—is left haunted by a sense of that which has gone before.

As a poem espousing growth or as novels with progression built into their plot structures, these literary works ought to leave us in places varied from those in which we began. In each, however, we find an ongoing, endless process: for example—though she equates it with a quality of Russian fiction—in her essay on “Modern Fiction,” Woolf marvels at “the sense that there is no answer, that if honestly examined life presents question after question which must be left to sound on and on after the story is over in hopeless interrogation.”¹ This hint of a narrative without the finality of resolution is where the writers leave us: Wordsworth, attempting to build an “I” through growth, finds the linearity distorted; Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, in creating his Creature, finds the uncanny duality of existence and embodied presence of the past, even in his attempts to move forward in the narrative; and Woolf’s loose association between people and memories moves towards a sinking beneath the surface of the present moment. Though, on its own, the traditional notion of the sublime forged by Longinus, Burke, and Kant posits an ascent towards the supersensible, it has clearer resolutions in theory than it does when applied to the texts. The Woolfian “moment of being” and the Wordsworthian “spots of time” themselves function akin to the Longinian sublime moment, though in a text in which many of these

moments are embedded, this sense of elevation (or sinking, in the case of Woolf) is fragmented and complicates linearity and chronology. Borrowing from Woolf's metaphor of the waves, though these moments uplift one as a crest of a wave might, eventually the wave flattens, and a trough takes hold. In *Frankenstein*, this water metaphor becomes imputed to light as Shelley appropriates Promethean motifs and her figures find themselves stalled within the Arctic's ice. In *The Prelude*, the streams and rivers of Wordsworth's childhood meander throughout the poem, though find themselves figuratively eddying around moments implanted like rocks throughout the text. With all of this taken into consideration, the metaphor of time as a sieve is particularly apt, as moments retained from the flow of the past come back to haunt one, often through the materiality of the present.

To turn back towards the question that I posed at the beginning of this paper—why apply the sublime to the works of authors who did not explicitly engage with it before—I hope that, in particular, one answer has been shown: that to do so allows us to broaden both the criticism and the literature; that, through their application, the theories of the sublime suggest a new reading of the narrative “disorder” of these texts. In addition, through combining these three, specific texts as hallmarks of the Romantic, Gothic, and modernist sublime, I hope to have created a contextual reading in which the ground-breaking nature of these works has been illuminated: from the epic, autobiographical poem revolutionary for treating the self as a worthy subject, to a work of science fiction that views the creative self in a new light, to a play-poem destabilizing in its constructed narration, the singular figure—the singular self—multiplies into selves, rife with an innumerable, interminable, and perhaps eternal significance.

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Notes

 Chapter I: "What we call the beginning is often the end": An Introduction

- ¹ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 12.
- ² Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime*, 8.
- ³ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 39.
- ⁴ Brady, "Reassessing Aesthetic Appreciation," 94.
- ⁵ Shaw, 14.
- ⁶ Shaw, 12.
- ⁷ Longinus, *On Great Writing*, Chapter 1.
- ⁸ Doran, 27.
- ⁹ Shaw, 14.
- ¹⁰ Longinus, Chapter 7.
- ¹¹ Longinus, Chapter 8.
- ¹² Longinus, Chapter 10.
- ¹³ Longinus, Chapter 10.
- ¹⁴ Longinus, Chapter 15.
- ¹⁵ Longinus, Chapter 17.
- ¹⁶ Burke, 31.
- ¹⁷ Burke, 39.
- ¹⁸ Burke, 51.
- ¹⁹ Burke, 57.
- ²⁰ Burke, 58-59.
- ²¹ Burke, 60.
- ²² Burke, 62.
- ²³ Burke, 61.
- ²⁴ Burke, 72.
- ²⁵ Burke, 72.
- ²⁶ Burke, 72-73.
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- ⁴ Onorato, "The Fiction of the Self," 109.
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³⁰ Mortensen, 102-103.
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Chapter III: "The bolt has entered my soul": The Gothic Sublime in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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² Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 58-59.
³ Buzwell, "Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* and the Villa Diodati."
⁴ Ruston, "The Science of Life and Death in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*."
⁵ Mullan, "The Origins of the Gothic."
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⁷ Bowen, "Gothic Motifs."
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³⁰ Thacker, "Theorising Space and Place," 22-24.
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³⁷ Vidler, "The Architecture of the Uncanny," 12.
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⁶² Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 46, 193.
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⁶⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 197.

⁶⁵ Vidler, 20.

Chapter IV: "We are the thing itself": Virginia Woolf and the Modernist Sublime in *The Waves*

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³ Thacker, "Virginia Woolf: Literary Geography," 166.

⁴ Klitgård, *On the Horizon*, 1.

⁵ Thacker, "Virginia Woolf: Literary Geography," 175.

⁶ Thacker (citing Harvey, *Postmodernity*, 99), "Theorising Space and Place," 36.

⁷ Thacker, "Theorising Space and Place," 37.

⁸ Thacker, "Theorising Space and Place," 38.

⁹ Stevenson, "Broken Mirrors: The First World War."

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¹³ Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 80.

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¹⁸ Woolf, "'Jane Eyre' and 'Wuthering Heights.'"

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²³ Becker-Lecrone, "'Sole Author I, Sole Cause,'" 999.

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²⁷ Schulkind, 21.

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³⁰ Schulkind, 18.

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⁴³ Klitgård, *On the Horizon*, 3.

⁴⁴ Klitgård, *On the Horizon*, 50.

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- ⁵⁰ Woolf, *The Waves*, 18-19.
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⁵⁵ Woolf, *The London Scene*, 31.
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⁵⁸ Woolf, *The Waves*, 33.
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⁶⁰ Woolf, *The Waves*, 43.
⁶¹ O'Hara, "Woolf's 'Unborn Selves,'" 67.
⁶² Woolf, *The Waves*, 64.
⁶³ Woolf, *The Waves*, 65.
⁶⁴ Woolf, *The Waves*, 67.
⁶⁵ de Certeau, "Chapter VII: Walking in the City," 103.
⁶⁶ Woolf, *The Waves*, 75.
⁶⁷ Woolf, *The Waves*, 89.
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⁷⁴ Woolf, *The Waves*, 127.
⁷⁵ Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 49.
⁷⁶ Kearney, 185.
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⁸⁰ Woolf, *The Waves*, 110.
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⁸⁴ Woolf, *The Waves*, 219.
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⁸⁶ Kearney, 208.
⁸⁷ Woolf, *The Waves*, 115.
⁸⁸ Weiskel, 49.
⁸⁹ Woolf, *The Waves*, 138.
⁹⁰ Weiskel, 43.

Coda: "In the stillness between two waves of the sea"

¹ Woolf, "Modern Fiction."