The Authorial Sublime: Text and Apotheosis

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Abstract

By definition, the sublime is unknowable, and therefore similarly unachievable. This essay, however, challenges the notion of sublimity as unattainable by comparing the literary criticisms of Roland Barthes and Hélène Cixous. In comparing their works and analyzing the dual significance each puts on the importance of "audience" as contributor, the very transformative characteristic of the sublime becomes apparent in the author. Writing is an uncanny act, and reading becomes a reimagining of what constitutes the sublime for and within each person who engages with a text. Roland's famous "The Death of the Author" elevates the author to a perpetual liveliness when read in conjunction with Hélène Cixous's concepts of self, text, and the Third Body, therefore transcending the author from death to sublimity, even as the author's works forever incur the uncanny responses of their perpetually-shifting audience and contextualization. Writing, thus, acts as a way by which one may surpass the limits of independent humanity and achieve the status of sublime.

The concept of sublimity is fantastical in that it is incomprehensible beyond knowing it cannot be fully comprehended. Often, the sublime is brought into focus by metaphors of the ocean: its tumultuous waves, its endless expanse to those watching it—the sublime is the observer's knowing that they can never know what they are seeing or experiencing in its full capacity. Sublimity is an admittance of the inferiority of the self when faced with something perceivably, infinitely beyond one's capacity. By that very notion, becoming sublime is, by definition, impossible, as it is characterized strictly by the experience of "transformation… vigorously resist[ing] perfection in the sense of ontological completion" (Morgan 83), and, therefore, any supposed perfection of it would negate the very transformative property that characterizes it.

That is not to say, however, that attempts cannot be made to attain as close to sublimity as is possible. Axiomatically, sublimity—even through uncanny pursuit—is unattainable, lest it no longer be sublime. That is, with one exception, what I intend to explore. By exploring the concept of text and authorship presented by Hélène Cixous and Roland Barthes, while the sublime author may still be an impossible goal as an individual, the author figure is capable of becoming sublime through their reception by others.

If sublimity is the acknowledgment of inferiority in comparison to incomprehensible greatness, then the attempt at becoming so (however futile) is through the uncanny. Mike Kelley and Thomas McEvilley compare the uncanny to intentionally and dangerously riding a motorcycle: to be going "a hundred miles an hour at night to *deliberately* [emphasis added] feel the terror and wonder of the sublime" (202). I chose to emphasize "deliberately" in this context because the sublime is by definition qualitative of the experience it evokes—seeing a mountain or gazing at the stars, "Milton's descriptions of hell, and infinity" (Kelley 201)—and being reminded of one's minuscular position. The uncanny, however, is the pursuit of recreating that feeling, to get as close to that unknowable sensation as possible. Sublimity, sensation, uncanny, recreation— "the sublime [as] primarily by way of trying to shadow forth the formless," whereas with "the uncanny [,] you've reversed the direction" (203). The viewer shifts from being a passive recipient of the sublime subject to active involvement in the process, which incites that very metaphysical response.

Cixous formulates the majority of her notion of the sublime on Freud's foundation, in which he describes the Uncanny as the

> old, animistic conception of the universe, which was characterized by the… narcissistic overestimation of subjective mental processes; by the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts and the magical practices based upon this belief…by all those other figments of the imagination with which man…strove to fend off the inexorable prohibitions of reality. (Freud 93)

Freud's uncanny operates in such a way as to extend one's self beyond the bodily constraints and experience emotions that "[fulfil] the condition of touching those vestiges of animistic mental activity within us" (93), however inaccessible those visceral feelings may be. To Cixous, however detrimental to the self the act may be, writing creates this window to the sublime through which a person may become closest to the uncanny experience.

"Writing," writes Hélène Cixous, "comes from deep inside…some call it hell" ("Three Steps" 118), and this hell (similar to the example of Milton that Kelley earlier provided) operates as a metaphor for the internalized de-sublimation of thought. She articulates that "[hell] is deep in my body, further down, behind thought. Thought comes in front of it and closes it like a door. This does not mean that it does not think, but it thinks differently from our thinking and speech" (118). To Cixous, the hell—the "it" to which she refers—inside people is not a repository of individual thoughts, but more of the thoughts-of-our-thoughts, the primal, reactionary responses we experience when witnessing something sublime that is unable to be articulated. This is reiterative of Freud's declaration that "an uncanny experience occurs either when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (Freud 97), though she deviates from the association of these thoughts as almost exclusively that of youth.

Cixous holds the act of writing in exceptionally high regard. Cixous presents writing not merely as a scrawling of words onto paper, the transference of words to materiality, but as an impartation of oneself: "the portrait of the artist done by himself or herself" ("Three Steps" 27). To be a writer is to "institute immurement" (27) of the self, to take part of one's self, and separate it. One must utilize their facilities to write as a means to "put herself into text—as into the world and into history" ("Laugh" 1869), to immortalize both thought, presence, and being. Thus, writing becomes not a separate act, but an active separation and transference of parts of oneself into text. The inherent dissection of self is similar to the comparison made to Frankenstein, wherein the act of writing acts as a creation of a "golem" (Kelley 203) of the inner thoughts, tearing apart the self, reorganizing it, and attempting to recreate these thoughts through writing.

The process of writing then trivializes the emotion the artist is attempting to convey. In doing so, such an act subsequently removes the internalized experiences from the previous quality that rendered it sublime: its incomprehensibility. If thoughts, according to Cixous, originate in the depths of a self-sustained hell, and Hell is quintessentially sublime, then the act of writing is the employment of the uncanny that—instead of achieving sublimity—removes it from the creator: "the voice loses its origin" (Barthes 1268). Once thoughts are put to words, the thoughts and emotions they represent have therefore been removed from the categorization of sublime. For the uncanny to be

considered such, it must "exceed the present and the familiar"; Matt Ffytche describes the uncanny as "disturbing but also generative, existing beyond representation" (70). This draws forth Barthes's concept of the author as equally sublime, "not because [the text] is created by an author but it is the language which gives it sound and meaning" (Ahmadi 2670). The "dead" author Barthes explores, instead, begins to exist among various times and people in direct relation to the readers' language(s). Once a text is written, it no longer exists exclusively as the author's intention, but within and beyond its time for having been represented as best it can by the author through the language to which the author was bound.

Cixous further describes reading as an act of "changing eras, changing families, changing destinies" ("Three Steps" 22), and if reading is the catalyst to do so, then the author is the creator of such a catalyst. While Barthes argues that "the text is henceforth made and read in such a way that the author is absent" (1270), with one's writing as inseparable from the self, then reading is to unavoidably live (even if temporarily) in the life of another. While Barthes posits the "book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and after" (1270), Barthes does not consider how this separation acts as a combination of the two through the time and lens of the reader. This process can otherwise be described as "experimental becoming" (Bray 65) in which one uses "[one's] own body as a form of transport" for "journeying through the world" (Cixous, "Three Steps" 64). This is true of both the reader and the writer. The author imparts their being via thought into their work, which transports the reader into a separate mentality, into a world that existed before the reader, and reconstructs the text and the author.

The reader internalizes this metaphysical "experimental becoming" and brings the author's world to them, subjecting it to scrutiny and interpretation through their thought processes. This very notion of an author's "death" "restores the position of the author by saying that it will be very difficult to eliminate the author from criticism" (Di Leo 125). According to Cixous: "All great texts are prey to the question: who is killing me? Who am I giving myself to kill?" ("Three Steps" 15). To put words unto page is to allow someone else access not just to the physical work, but to the very meaning those words hold, and by proxy, access to the writer. The author and their work then become comparable to "the resuscitation of a corpse" (Kelley 203): thoughts of theirs once sublime, rendered not by the author's uncanny processes, are now reintroduced to sublimity by the reader's interpretation. By having been read, the author's thoughts (and therefore, the author) return to sublimity by reentering the process of enigmatic transformation (Morgan 83) necessary to qualify as such, becoming "generative" (Ffytche 70) once more.

Cixous explores this notion of Ffytche's generative, eternal uncanny by the pre-

scription of "textual effects" ("Three Steps" 145) unto authors. Textual effect is the means by which an author's name is the only way that a particular style of writing or evocation of feeling can be described, mimicking the literary technique of "synaesthesia," in which "a stimulus applied to one sense involuntarily elicits a response from one or more others" (Oboussier 115). The name, in this case, is operating as the indicator for whichever specific reaction is expected. This usage of a name in regard to an effect does not necessarily mean one has to be "attracted by the authors whose names are at work in the language but simply that there aren't any names which don't produce such effects" (145). Cixous herself exemplifies this point in her works: she draws upon former theorists by name, describing her positions as framed either by Freudian, or Lacanian, or Derridean influences on numerous occasions—the "author's name…the author function…offers instructions on how the text should be read" (Ahmadi 2672). With sublime defined as the acknowledgment of experiences or thoughts beyond one's self, to have a name become synaesthetic as the indicative of a particular mode of expression, theory, or other decisive orchestration of thoughts is to elevate that name as similarly sublime in its self-reliant explanation.

By this vein, an author's name itself becomes similar in nature to that of the word "sublime," in that any other attempt to describe it comparatively would render its explanation less axiomatic. The sublime's very definition is evident in its quality as a "willing loss of self" (Kelley 202), similar to Cixous's declaration that "the only book that is worth writing is the one…that hurts us" ("Three Steps" 32), the book in which one [author] willfully pours oneself, regardless of what must be done or experienced to do so. This reiterates once more that writing is a sublime performance. Understanding writing as self-sacrificial, the act (though not the result) becomes sublime as an attempt at both synaesthetic and uncanny recreation: "Who am I giving myself to kill?" Writing is equal parts writing one's self as it is permitting an outsider to interpret (and reconstruct) not just the words, but the author.

Horror author H.P. Lovecraft is an exceptional example of both synaesthesias in writing and authorial authority. To focus on the prior point, in his short story "Beyond the Wall of Sleep," he writes in a fashion that emulates Cixous's conceptualization of an individualized, self-contained hell:

> As I gazed, I perceived that my own brain held the key to these enchanting metamorphoses; for each vista which appeared to me, was the one my changing mind most wished to behold. Amidst this elysian realm I dwelt not as a stranger, for each sight and sound was familiar to me; just as it had been for uncounted aeons of eternity before, and would be for like eternities to come. (Lovecraft 25)

Lovecraft writes of the uncanny in a way similar to its explanation by Kelley, having

"depart[ed], into that hypothetical beyond… showing the small formed reality into which the sublime is ingressing" (203). Lovecraft's protagonist is experiencing a projection from his reality, which can only be described in terms of familiar and not-familiar, exemplifying the human condition in which our "understanding [of] what constitutes the mysterious… precedes our confrontation with the other.… It is not the product of an intimate connection with the other" (Bray 182) that shapes our understanding of it, but our cognizance of self that allows us to then approach and process the information.

Note how only the familiar is described definitively: "sight and sound" and the protagonist's "own brain," whereas the unfamiliar, previously unexperienced sensations, are described in the most recognizable though simultaneously inexplicable means possible: "enchanting metamorphoses," "elysian realm." These statements indicate only the vaguest process of knowing something is occurring and being unable to enunciate it—the sublime. His grasp of what is being seen is limited to what his "changing mind most wished to behold," illustrating his limited discernment of the uncanny and similar barrier between it, "underscore[ing] the shortcomings of the humanistic mode of subjectivity upon which the sublime is predicated" (Ralickas 365). Were people not restricted in comprehension, the sublime could not exist. Not only does Lovecraft encompass the sublime in his minimalist presentation of it, he similarly expresses the uncanny as "a disturbance apprehended via the affects of a subject that has not yet elicited the terms of what disturbs it" (Ffytche 79) through his protagonist's attempt at perceiving the ether before him.

Following this, Lovecraft equally showcases how the expulsion of the uncanny occurs. His protagonist once more transcends consciousness, this time encountering an otherworldly being who speaks to him, whereas previously, the understanding was strictly through limited and inaccurate projections. This entity speaks to him: "I am an entity that which you yourself become in the freedom of dreamless sleep… it is not permitted me to tell your waking earth-self of your real self, but we are all roamers of the vast spaces and travelers in many ages" (Lovecraft 27), and in doing so, eliminates the sense of the sublime that existed before explanation. The uncanny is inherently limited to its being beyond finite understanding, "the subject or individual will never arrive at such terms, for this would be to dissipate the uncanny" (Ffytche 79). The uncanny "in this story reaches its peak at the nonverbal speech of the entity through the dead peasant, which the narrator retells in words" (Ghodrati 42) and therefore robs of its sublimity.

Furthermore, the designation of this style as being characteristic of his writing—the very denotation as "Lovecraftian"—is indicative of the synaesthetic effects of his style. He has managed to capture in this story the sheer awe, majesty, and terror (Kelley 202) characteristic of the uncanny so well that the idea of recreating such a cosmic effect again

can only be done in comparison to his namesake. It is this ascension of name that Cixous reveres, the encapsulation of "names…that produce signifying effects ("Three Steps" 145). While Barthes would put forth this level of interpretative involvement as the death of the author for lack of creative autonomy, this instead elevates the author to a figure that continues to live well beyond their time of writing.

Cixous enunciates time and again that text offers transport, that writing is "journeying through the world" ("Three Steps" 64); she says the same of dreams, except "you are not transported, you are already in the other world" (79). If dreams offer insight into the depths of one's psyche, then dreams represent the sublime, and writing the uncanny—this she later addresses in stating "the dream's enemy is interpretation" (107), and "the sublime, which thought consumes, is transformed into utilities" (Irigaray 79). As Barthes puts forth, "the voice loses its origins, the author enters his own death, writing begins" (1268), and it is now the reader who has power over the author's meaning: "it is the language which speaks, not the author" (1269). Because of this dichotomy, the aforementioned prejudices of Lovecraft become relevant: regardless of his intentions through text, he has no voice with which to argue, defend, divert, or justify.

However, when viewed through the lens of the authorial sublime, Cixous's position becomes paradoxical by analyzing what she refers to as "the third body" ("Coming to Writing" 53):

> Here, this body opens up another way of thinking through corporeality as something which is not simply anchored in the presence of the flesh but which is nomadic, moves beyond the body, and yet is part of the body. The third body is that which is created through the exchange. (Bray 63–4)

This creation of the "third body" —this "golem," as referred to earlier by Kelley—is the reader existing both physically as they are, but temporally in the thoughts and time of the author as they process what is being communicated. The third body is not so much an actual body, but the manifestation of the translation of ideas between author, reader, and time(s)—a "form of writing which exchanges representations of the other…and creates a 'limitless language' which will 'perpetuate us'" (Bray 64). With "us" being the combination of both the author and reader through this constructed body of thought, the perpetuation of such permits not only that the author never dies, but that the author will continue to live through the lives of those that encounter and project its work.

However, this then opens a new avenue through which the author figure may be perceived. If the life of the author is then continued through the reader(s), that can only mean multiple versions of the author exist at any given time. With "the text [as] a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes 1270), the

author and their text act as a vessel to a time in which those previous influences of culture conglomerated. Cixous posits that a "text can have begun before us" ("Three Steps" 99), meaning that just as the author's writing may influence others, so too has their writing been influenced by those before them. In this case, we may view writing and text not as the "death of the author," but instead as "a gift[,] because it destroys old conceptions of the self and the world and makes room for a new life, new ways of being" (Bray 68). These ways of being, however, must be constructed by the reader—dead authors cannot rewrite themselves.

Despite language's fluidity, it "continues to be seen as a medium through which we gain access to the real substance of ideas, feelings, events" (Belsey 201). For Barthes, this remains true until an author is prescribed, at which point such an association does little more than "impose a limit on [a] text" (1271). For Cixous, however, this variation is not the death it is for Barthes, but the "death of death itself… a multiplicity of new selves" (Bray 68) being born with each new reading and iteration. To follow Cixous's position, "to write against death is to continuously pursue and challenge the limits of identity" (Bray 69) imposed by individualism, which "seeks explanations…negating the influence of culture and society in the construction of themselves" (Belsey 201). For her, the application of the author to meaning—this "textual effect" of hers—which can then be deconstructed, analyzed, and reconstructed by a reader, is a complete inversion of the implications Barthes provides.

Cixous is instead in favor of the communal construction of text because it allows the writer to surpass death. If the "death of the author must be understood as the birth of the text" (Di Leo 125), then through Cixous's analysis as sublime, this may be re-envisioned as the birth of a text being the subsequent and multiple rebirths of the author. Death is merely "another term for limit" (Bray 68) that Cixous seeks to surpass through writing. Despite her approach being rooted in Freud's interpretation of the uncanny, Cixous's opinions of the uncanny and literature are drastically different:

> Cixous focuses on the aspect of literary creation, which is linked to power, liberty, and life. The power of the creative writer, so envied by Freud, is of a different nature than the power of society or science. It is a power that not merely transgresses but transcends the laws of reality and society. Fiction entails a victory over death not because it abolishes death, but because it refuses death as the absolute limit. It ignores death. (Masschelein 120)

While Cixous views literature as a vessel through which the uncanny can be explored, transcending reality, Freud instead believes writing to act as a limit. Instead of a means towards ascendance, his opinion is that a person's sublime experience "cannot be transposed

on to the uncanny in fiction without profound modification; for the realm of phantasy depends for its very existence on the fact that its content is not submitted to the reality-testing faculty" (Freud 97), reiterated earlier by Irigaray (79).

However, Cixous's uncanny extends beyond its mere reiteration in textual form, but as a physical embodiment of the author. This focus on faculty that "the story-teller has this license among many others, that he can select his world of representation so that it either coincides with the realities we are familiar with or departs from them" (Freud 97), Cixous acknowledges and then deepens it, "revers[ing] the direction" (Kelley 203) of focus from the exploration of the writing itself to the reader's internalizing of the writer. Something written cannot die. Reading is the exploration of the past, interpreting it the sublime, and writing the uncanny, "and anyone who does not go down into the abyss [death] can only repeat and retrace the ways already opened" (Irigaray 79) by writers before them. It is in this way that authors achieve sublimity—while not through their own uncanny efforts, but the internalization of them by and through others that engage with their works by inviting the reader to explore a time unfamiliar.

Here, the uncanny of fiction bleeds into writing as a whole when Cixous's interpretation of the uncanny is applied to Barthes's construction of the author figure. Through the amalgamation of the two, Barthes's assertion that "the author is never more than the instance writing" (1269) is dispelled and instead replaced with being simultaneously every instance that their work is being read. Writing no longer acts as simply "composing words upon a page," but as "a mode of living in the world" (Bray 69–70)—both the world of the work's conception and the interpretation by every world that succeeds it. Instead of "writing [as] the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin" (Barthes 1268), this perpetual invitation of interpretation is exactly what gives the author a voice! Rather than a writer being exclusively bound to their book, existing as a phylactery of their former self, to be continually engaged in dialogues is the very continuation of the author's life. If writing were never read, processed, interpreted, shared, well—what point would there be in writing for it to then be forever shelved?

Barthes's criticism that interpretation causes a voice to "lose its origin" (1268) completely ignores the very nature of language. "While the world has meaning that a person assigns to it, [the] contribution to its meaning is only one half of the reciprocal relationship that takes place between subject and object" (Sullivan 67), drawing Barthes's argument into question—maybe the author has the chance to be misunderstood by the reader, but true death arrives when there is no longer an additional party to contribute to their works' meaning. While the "subject or individual [the author] will never arrive at such terms" (Ffytche 79) as to constitute the sublime, for to do so "would be to dissipate

the uncanny" (79), the attainment of so can be done vicariously through the reader, "conflat[ing] questions of interpretation with those of identity" (Di Leo 126).

So, if writing is thus uncanny as an (attempted) expression of one's most primordial thoughts as expressed by Freud, but that "some forms of writing do take something from us" ("Three Steps" 115) in such expression, then through writing and reading "each person and all things rest in one another, flow into the other unconfined" (Irigaray 80). For Barthes, the structure "imposed by language on reality which determine our perception of it [leads to] the text of art amount[ing] to nothing more than a set of codes which control its production" (Di Leo 128). However, Cixous views this attribute of language much more positively, as an "endless oscillation on the limit between life and death" (Massachelein 122) in which the author has the capacity to fluctuate between time, place, and persons. Rather than subject the author to death, such reception elevates them to sublimity by the perpetual abstraction and reconfiguration by inhabitants of times inconceivable to the writer. Barthes's author-death, revisited with the understanding of dialogue as inseparably transactional, reaffirms Cixous's proposition of the author as perpetually alive through their work: "Who dreams you?" ("Coming to Writing" 55).

This sublime dream, to writing, to reading, to being read is a transformation of the self into a figure "no longer constituted of preordained ideas; words meet and infiltrate each other, exceeding the fixed repertoire of language" (Oboussier 122). Dreams and text are inextricably linked for Cixous, propositioning that people "are not having the dream, the dream has us…even if the dream is in the author in the way the text is assumed to be" ("Three Steps" 98). Writing creates an inversion of ownership of text to the dependence on others and their perception of the text. Even after the author dies, the text lives, and the author's dialogue is capable of "achieving unprecedented intersubjective economies" (Oboussier 127) through its constant and ever-evolving interpretations.

While the sublime is defined by its inability to be obtained, an analysis of Barthes and Cixous suggest the possibility that sublimity may still be prescribed by both time and the uncanny processes of the inevitable audience. The elevation to inconsistency and variation of meanings constituted in the Third Body between the reader and writer create an uncanny author not by the author's own recreation of self, but their recreation by the reader. The author then acts as an avatar of their time through the perception of the reader, no longer "the instance writing" (Barthes 1269), but every and all instances of that writing read and interpreted by every audience thereafter. This transcendence of time and corporality is the very characteristic of the sublime—beyond a concrete and inarguable definition. So long as the text circulates and impresses into the minds of others, the author becomes a sublime surrogate in correspondence with, by, and through the deci-

phering of the audiences' uncanny processes. By achieving death according to Barthes, and then surpassing it according to Cixous, the dead author achieves a synaesthetic, a liminal and limboid authorial sublimity through their infinite interaction with and among times.

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