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The Unnameable Representation(s) of the Sublime

H. P. Lovecraft's narrator of *The Unnamable* is criticized by a friend for talking, of writing, about things which cannot be really talked or written about:

Besides, he added, my constant talk about "unnameable" and "unmentionable" things was a very puerile device, quite in keeping with my lowly standing as an author. I was too fond of ending my stories with sighs or sounds which paralyzed my hero's faculties and left them without courage, words, or associations to tell what they had experienced¹.

One might suspect that the friend, Joel Manton, accuses Carter, the narrator and a writer, of writing about nothing, of giving names to things which are unnameable and thus nonexistent from the point of view of scientific or philosophical discourse for which, as Manton puts it, "it is quite impossible to refer to any object or spectacle which cannot be clearly depicted by the solid definitions of fact or the correct doctrines of theology"². The world, both human and divine, is thus thinkable only as nameable, as capable of being properly named and expressed. To refer to something as unnameable is to deny the possibility of its (at least linguistic) presentation and definition simultaneously claiming some kind of presence for that something. In other words, promising to present the unnamable, the narrator leaves his heroes without words to express their experiences otherwise than as unnamable. This is exactly what happens in "The Unnamable". Joel Manton, paralyzed and terrified describes his experience to which he is gradually led by the movement of the narrative using a number of contradictory phrases only to eventually name it as unnameable:

¹ H. P. Lovecraft, *The Lurking Fear and Other Stories* (New York: Eagle Books, 1971), p. 99.

² *Ibid.*, p. 99.

"No — it wasn't that way at all. It was everywhere — a gelatin — a slime — yet it had shapes, a thousand shapes of horror beyond all memory. There were eyes — and a blemish. It was the pit — the maelstrom — the ultimate abomination. Carter, it was the unnamable!"³

Lovecraft introduces his friend, and the reader, to the unnameable "un-teaching" them the "deafness to the delicate overtones of life"⁴ by way of "unnaming" the experience whose only name can be "the unnamable", the word which does not really name anything, still attesting to its (unnameable's) existence.

The unnameable can remain unnameable only as long as it remains unnamed, a negativity of sorts whose verbal actualization would annihilate it. Curing our "deafness", learning an ability to hear the "delicate overtones of life", leads straight to a St. Mary's Hospital in which Lovecraft's story ends, and where Joel Manton tries to express his experience. The expression of the unnameable would possibly become a cure, a return to the world without any overtones, a safe world of the "homely" names. Manton's failed attempt at expressing it leaves it as a lurking fear which is there, but whose expression has to be suppressed, repressed into the sphere beyond language as a meaning, or content, without a name. Though textually unrepresentable, this content is bound to be mediated by a narrative which cannot repeat the experience. It can only posit it as a memory, as remembering, as an anteriority which cannot become an object of a history, of a science, and thus a source of anxiety, a form of expectation which Harold Bloom identifies with the poetic Sublime.

Bloom reads Freud as a poet of the Sublime who has "more in common with Proust and Montaigne than with biological scientists" because

... his interpretations of life and death are mediated always by texts, first by the literary texts of others, and then by his own earlier texts, until at last the Sublime meditation of otherness begins to be performed by his text-in-process⁵.

No meditation of otherness, it seems, can be otherwise than sublime. Since, in Bloom's reading, the true origin of the Sublime in Freud is "the ego's earliest defense, its primal repression", then the idea of putting the repressed in presentation is a "parody of the Sublime" comparable to the id (the realm outside the ego) perceiving the id, which both Freud and Bloom find in Jung⁶. The meditation of otherness is thus bound to be "poetic" as it is incapable of bringing the other back home to the ego because once repressed,

³ Ibid., p. 106.

⁴ Ibid., p. 99.

⁵ H. Bloom, "Freud and the Sublime: A Catastrophe Theory of Creativity", in *Contemporary Critical Theory*, ed. D. Latimer (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), p. 556.

⁶ Ibid., p. 550.

"images or thoughts ... cannot make their way into consciousness, yet their content can, on condition that it is denied"⁷. Like the poetics of Lovecraft's unnameable, the poetics of otherness is a negative poetics in which naming is a mode of the denial of the content which allows this content to "make its way" into the presentable without actually being presented. The unnameable is thus only an apparent opposite of the nameable in the way Freud's *das Heimliche* is only an apparent opposite of the uncanny, *das Unheimliche*, "for this uncanny", here is Bloom quoting Freud from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, "is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression"⁸.

Something other, estranged, and yet familiar, domestic and close, is, of course, an oxymoron bringing to mind the oxymoron of the pleasurable terror or horror to be found in the eighteenth-century writings on the sublime, from Addison through Burke to Kant. "The feeling of the sublime", says Kant in *The Critique of Judgement*.

is ... at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement of the inadequacy of sense of being in accord with ideas of reason, so far as the effort to attain to these is for us a law⁹.

In other words, the sublime constitutes an object of our interest in Kant only as a kind of background against which the law of reason appears, or is signalled, as the awakened pleasure of human ability to judge. Though fearful, the sublime is simultaneously attractive because it actually grants us the (epistemological) security of position. As if extending Burke's idea that the sublime can be delightful only when its terrible aspects do not "press too nearly", when they are "at certain distances, and with certain modifications"¹⁰, Kant sees such a distant, secure position away from nature. In *The Critique of Judgement* he says that the "boundless ocean rising with rebellious force" is attractive "for its fearfulness" only provided that "our own position is secure"¹¹. Though he calls "the might of nature" "irresistible", he simultaneously posits human-being away from the terrifying might of nature, inscribes the resistance within man in the way he inscribes the moral law within him leaving the starry sky at some very distant distance. "The irresistibility of the might of nature",

⁷ Ibid., p. 548.

⁸ Ibid., p. 543.

⁹ I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 106.

¹⁰ E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: 1812), pp. 59—60.

¹¹ I. Kant, *The Critique...*, p. 111.

he says, "forces upon us the recognition of our physical helplessness as beings of nature, but at the same time reveals a faculty of estimating ourselves as independent of nature"¹².

The security of position in thus granted us somehow paradoxically, as Kant's "we" seems to be referring to creatures which are simultaneously natural and independent of nature. What Paul Crowther calls "the awareness of our moral existence" which enables us to recognize objects as fearful in Kant¹³ is not the awareness which only accompanies us while "beholding mighty natural objects from the position of safety"¹⁴ but is actually constitutive of that position as a gesture of resistance which, also simultaneously, marks the feeling of fear as actually somehow immoral. Like in Freud, no exploration of the fearful sphere of the sublime is thinkable in Kant, as it would demand the abandonment of the trench of the morally secure position. As unrepresentable, the sublime is productive of a painful delight called enthusiasm which borders on *dementia*, and, according to Lyotard, "is a pathological attack and as has such in itself no ethical validity, since ethics requires one to be free of all motivating pathos"¹⁵.

There is no sign of the sublime in Kant, and it is for this reason that "in itself" it is ethically empty, which emptiness testifies to the fullness and completeness of the moral law as the fright which we feel transcending, or actually transgressing, the moral order of things. Though unnameable (unrepresentable), the sublime thus rendered as already categorised "otherness", is a somehow negative sign enabling us to estimate our (moral) being "independent of nature", a "simply negative presentation" (Kant's term) which, in Lovecraft, was an attempt to make us sensitive to the delicate overtones of nature, and which in Kant actually deafens us to those overtones as the "sounds" of the *Schwärmerei*, of the "tumult of exaltation" which is also a mark of insanity¹⁶. The "quasiperceptibility" (again Kant's term) of the sublime 'situation' makes Lyotard wonder whether there is a room for an aesthetic of the sublime in Kant. In *The Inhuman* he writes:

The principal *interest* that Kant sees in the sublime sentiment is that it is the 'aesthetic' (negative) sign of a transcendence proper to ethics, the transcendence of the moral law and of freedom. In any case, the sublime cannot be the fact of a human art, or even of a nature 'complicit' ... with our sentiment¹⁷.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹³ P. Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime. From Morality to Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 110.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁵ J-F. Lyotard, "The sign of History", in *Post-structuralism and the Question of History*, eds. D. Attridge, G. Bennington, R. Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 173.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁷ J-F. Lyotard, *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 136—137.

Kant "invests" in the sublime (the word "interest" underlined by Lyotard suggest that what is at stake is a certain investment) which, as unrepresentable, cannot be an object of a reasonable philosophical investigation, in order to gain the natural which would be complicit with our sentiments. If nature is a "totality of rules"¹⁸, as he defines it in *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, then the sublime experience is in fact contrary to the natural and the human both being, as it seems, one and the same thing whose regulation is prompted by sentiment, by the law of the heart. Hence the experience of the sublime can only be made accessible through the aesthetic imagination as beautiful, as an object of art which has already been "theatricalized and framed"¹⁹. What results from this "theatricalization" is exactly the security of position as an aesthetic distance which, according to Sartre, positions the aesthetic object "behind itself", so that "it becomes untouchable, it is beyond our reach; hence arises a sort of disinterest in it"²⁰.

If Kant began, as Anthony J. Cascardi claims, "the tradition in aesthetics which takes the beautiful as something essentially unreal"²¹, then this "derealization" is in fact a realization of the unreal achieved by aestheticization of the sublime, by its framing, which gesture posits the sublime (already made beautiful) outside the natural as real, but still within the scope of the natural, human sentiments. Artistic beauty is higher than nature, as Hegel claimed, only provided that it also has some other nature which is still contingent with our sentiments. The sublimation of nature in art which moves nature above nature is simultaneously a desublimation of the sublime as unrepresentable, a presentation of the pleasurable terror without the terror which results from the realization of the "unrepresentability" of the sublime. What is at stake in the sublimation of nature, as Cascardi rightly claims, is "the process of raising and purifying nature by aestheticizing it"²² and thus positing it as purifiable by man. This purification, as it seems, actually means potentiality of presentation which inscribes the law, Kant's totality of rules, within the order of art which thus becomes but an extension of the natural order of things. Art purifies nature of the terror of the sublime thus confirming the existence of the law and order within man.

A literary expression of terror is thus always already an aesthetic expression, a theatricalized, framed presentation which is simultaneously negative in

¹⁸ I. Kant, *"Prolegomena" to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. P. Carus, rev. J. W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), p. 62.

¹⁹ Cf. A. J. Cascardi, "From the Sublime to the Natural: Romantic Responses to Kant", in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, ed. A. L. Cascardi (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 107.

²⁰ J.-P. Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 225. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 107.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

the sense that it renounces what it attempts to present thus somehow cathartically purifying our nature by way of making it sensitive to the value of order and law. Such is, at least, Stephen King's position as regards the horror genre. In *Danse Macabre* he says that "the creator of horror fiction is above all else and agent of the norm"²³ and in an interview included in *Bare Bones* he enlarges upon the idea:

... horror fiction is really as Republican as a banker in a three-piece suit. The story is always the same in terms of its development. There's an incursion into taboo lands, there's a place where you shouldn't go, but you do, the same way that your mother would tell you that the freak tent is a place you shouldn't go, but you do. And the same thing happens inside: you look at the guy with three eyes, or you look at the fat lady or you look at the skeleton man or Mr. Electrical or whoever it happens to be. And when you come out, well, you say, "Hey, I'm not so bad, I'm all right. A lot better than I thought". It has the effect of reconfirming values, of reconfirming self-image and our good feelings about ourselves. ... and let me further suggest that it is not the physical or mental aberration which horrifies us, but rather the lack of order which these situations imply²⁴.

Clinton voters, as it seems, do not read horror fiction or read it not as lacking order, but as a politically programmatic, positive rather than negative, kind of writing. Though Kant uses somehow different kind of idiom in his interpretation of the sublime, he also posits it as a taboo land of sorts which, as unrepresentable, cannot in fact be presented in writing whose order demands the ordering of the presented. If Kant's sublime is rendered as an unreality of sorts, as an unnatural nature thus negatively being named as both "the unrepresentable" and "the sublime", horror fiction offers us an orderly, because written, vision of disorder simultaneously rendering it as fictitious and thus derealizing it from the start. Horror fiction is thus both appealing and appalling, and what appeals to us is exactly the fiction of the appalling. It is the label "fiction", be it a written or an unwritten one, which grants the reader of horrors the security of position which does not put him or her in the position at which self-preservation is endangered. An intrusion to Stephen King's taboo lands is in fact a guided tour through the world of stuffed monsters displayed there only in order to confirm the value of the homely reality of the normal. Like Lovecraft's Manton from before his initiation into the unnamable, King's reader is always already convinced that the abnormal he is offered by a horror story does not actually exist thus, as it were, defeating the abnormal, denying the possibility of its intrusion into the normal which the horror story "presents".

Such a defeat of the abnormal is inscribed, according to Noel Carroll, within the "deep structure" of the horror fiction. From the point of view like King's, he writes:

²³ S. King, *Danse Macabre Berkeley Books* (New York: 1987), p. 48.

²⁴ *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*, eds. T. Underwood and C. Miller (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1988), pp. 9 and 39.

... the deep structure of the horror fiction is a three-part movement: 1) from normality (a state of affairs in which our ontologico-value schema rests intact); 2) to its disruption (a monster appears, shaking the very foundations of the culture's cognitive map — which affront itself may be perceived as immoral/abnormal — and predictably, the monster also does forbidden things like eating people); 3) to the final confrontation and defeat of the abnormal, disruptive being (thereby restoring the culture's scheme of things by eliminating the anomaly and punishing its violations of the moral order)²⁵.

Since a deep structure is at stake, there also must be some "horror fiction competence" (running parallel to Culler's "literary competence" and Chomsky's "linguistic competence") within our minds which makes us not only competent to eliminate the anomalous (sentences, for instance), but which actually necessitates this elimination. Carroll sees this competence at work also in the "rituals of rebellion" (from saturnalia to the present day Carnival) in which "customary decorum, morality, and taboos may be relaxed", but which, though including "some criticism of the social order ... contain that protest in a way that preserves and strengthens it"²⁶. Yet, as Carroll rightly notices, such an aprioristic allegorizing of horror fictions as purely ideological writings preserving the status quo does not work in cases (as is the case with Lovecraft's *The Unnamable*, for instance) where the "abnormal" is not quite eliminated or banished²⁷. The politically or morally cathartic effect of such stories is at least doubtful. Moreover, rather than eliminating the horrifying, *The Unnamable* as it were attempts at normalizing it, at bringing it within the sphere of the familiar and thus, paradoxically, inscribing the unfamiliar within the familiar as a residue, an "overtone" of the other which contaminates the security of position by the very possibility of its "being there" and simultaneously "here", within the world of Stephen King's bankers in three-piece suits.

It is exactly the paradox of "unnaming" reality, of denying its absolute "nameability" which, though a negative gesture, does not render the unnameable as an anomaly or monstrosity which endanger human position, but posits the question which Lyotard, hardly a horror story teller, asks in the introduction to his *The Inhuman*: "... what if what is 'proper' to humankind were to be inhabited by the inhuman?"²⁸ The possibility of posing such a question necessitates a certain demolition of the secure distance which aestheticizes the sublime in Burke, Kant and elsewhere. This, according to Lyotard, can be done from the postmodern perspective which is the perspective of putting forward the unrepresentable, the sublime, in presentation itself²⁹.

²⁵ N. Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 200.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 200—201.

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 201—202.

²⁸ J.-F. Lyotard, *The Inhuman...*, p. 2.

²⁹ J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 81.

What, however, is also at stake in the postmodern, the poststructuralist or the deconstructive seems to be the definite “the” delimiting the scope of the unnameable to a certain presentability which takes place, which can take place, only if the presentable, the aestheticized or the theorised is still available as a background, as marginalised foundation against which the postwhatever discourse defines itself as marginal. Without saying “no” to “the” or “the”r, neither does it quite say “no” to its opposite thus granting itself at least a marginal security of position exactly by saving the opposition. The Derridean “yes and no” answer to mostly everything is not, of course, the Kingean or Burkean escape to the normal, but it is simultaneously a gesture which sublimates the norm by contaminating it with the possibility of being an infinite play of discourse constantly overreaching itself. Yet this overreaching (dissemination, trace, transgression, abundance) actually posits the sublime as a positive category, as the norm of discourse, as a certain property which lacks properties. In a certain sense, the postmodern is thus a construction of the sublime, of the without properties, of the infinite, the inhuman, the unnameable which simultaneously renders this construction as desirable without quite identifying itself with it by way of questioning identity itself. It is in the paradox of putting the unrepresentable forward in presentation that inscribes a finitude into the infinite within the postmodern discourse thus actually repressing, let us return to Freud for a while, the repressed within the posited possibility of its expression, by marking the repressed, somehow against the grain of Freud’s speculations, as “wanted” within the sphere of the presentable. Hence a certain, however hidden, policing within the postmodern. The sublime, the unnameable is wanted, desired to be let free in a freeplay of the signifiers, but it is also clearly marked as transgressive or anomalous, as something to be coped with in writing, in making present without which Lyotard’s “inhumanization” of reality would be its “dehumanization”.

It is here, I think, in the necessity of a presentation which denies presentation, that the postmodern is incapable of saying a “yes”, even to itself. In its criticism of properties, of the proper, the postmodern at the same time wants to avoid the position of being possessed, of being given but also of giving itself, as well as of being mad. It is here, I think, that the feminist criticism finds, generally, postmodernism almost as phallogocentric as Cleland’s *Fanny Hill*, for instance. “Being possessed”, says Hélène Cixous, “is not desirable for a masculine imagery, which would interpret it as passivity — a dangerous feminine position”³⁰. The fear of being possessed is the gesture of repression of the femininity within the masculine which, according to Cixous, also forms the basis of psychoanalysis. In its denial of giving itself, of being possessed,

³⁰ H. Cixous, “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks (Ways Out) Forays”, in *The Feminine Reader. Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, eds. C. Belsey and J. Moore (Macmillan, 1989), p. 105.

poststructural discourse sublimates itself to the sphere beyond human reach so as to conceal its own femininity, the "being possessed" whose passive silence is threatening because it does not demand anything in return for the giving. In its denial of being possessed the masculine postmodernism gains identity exactly because of its refusal to give itself. The woman, the feminine, gives herself in the disinterested gesture coming from her "capacity to deappropriate herself without self-interest"³¹. Hence the sublime is raised, or erected, by men as the threatening outside and simultaneously an abstract object of exploration in order to externalize their own femininity and to simultaneously objectify it as the unnamable, for instance, or as a mysterious overtone of nature which in women is natural voice singing from within as the voice of love:

The Voice sings from a time before law, before the symbolic took one's breath away and reappropriated it into language under its authority of separation. The deepest, the oldest the loveliest Visitation. Within each woman the first, nameless love is singing³².

"Women have not sublimated. Fortunately"³³. For Cixous the sublime is a category of political/economic repression of giving, of being possessed. The nameless love which is the singing of the body is to be listened to rather than classified as the unnamable or the sublime.

Though far from being written about, the sublime is made audible throughout Cixous' text. Rather than representing, the feminine writing is to make human body heard, and what we hear is not the representation or theorization of the unnameable, of the repressed, of the sublime, but an outburst of the unconscious, of the suppressed "varied entirety, moving and boundless change, a cosmos where eros never stops travelling"³⁴. Rather than, like Burke or Kant, stepping away from the sublime, or like Lovecraft, Lyotard or Derrida positing it as the unnameable, the unrepresentable or the difference irreducibly attached to reality as the other, in Cixous we should let the feminine speak, "tear her out of the superegoed, over-Mosesed structure"³⁵ and listen to her voice without fear or horror as to our voice of love coming from within.

That such a voice of love may not sound very attractive to a Republican reader of horrors seems to be hardly questionable. Heard from within oneself, given by oneself as always already possessed and thus never one's own, such a voice can only be an affirmative one as regards what has been, very provisionally, termed here as the sublime; an "I will Yes" with which Cixous embarks towards a new writing which "can only go on and on, without ever inscribing or distinguishing the contours"³⁶.

³¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 104.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108.