

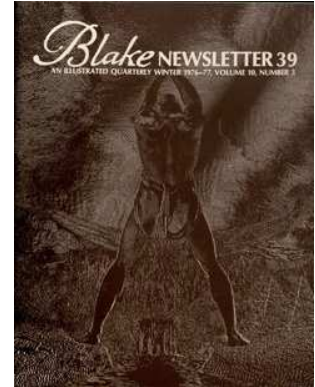
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R E V I E W

Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies
in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*

Michael Fischer

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toward disintegration. Yeats's entire system reflects his continual conscious attempt to rebuild and reintegrate an order which is continually crumbling. Hence Yeats's vision is itself ironic it involves not the release of energies to forge a new system but the retreat into an older order. It is a search for a "promised land," "a flight into the imagined past posing as a prophecy of an assured future" (p. 119).

The author's conclusions regarding the nature of these three visions leads directly to the Marxian perspective. Blake's vision of a totally new social order (a curative vision which is apocalyptic-millennial, based upon a humanistic faith) is superior to Yeats's vision of the reconstructed old, idealistic but essentially aristocratic order (a defensive vision which is ironic-tragic, based upon a heroic fatalism and skepticism), and is clearly preferable to Beddoes' vision of total destruction of all order (a suicidal vision which is grotesque, based upon nihilism). Since in their own times these visionary responses to crisis were regarded as irrelevant, unrealistic, and demented, respectively, they were ineffectual in healing the growing sense of societal disintegration. This being the case, the author tells us, we can see how Marx's vision provides the practical and redemptive prophecy, articulating as it does the discontent of an age and empowering a new vision of man and society. Ms. Wilner takes great care in detailing the manner in which Marx's vision may be regarded as a reworking of the concept of contraries in terms of actual material reality, a vision that verbalizes the physical needs of his time while promising the present oppressive situation must *necessarily* be overcome and the desired ends produced. Capitalism represents a dehumanizing and elitist form of estrangement which pits man against man and imposes upon most of society a natural and moral inferiority complex. Where the Marxian theory comes nearest the Blakean is in its conviction that the transformation of the inner man *precedes* that of the total society, arising from within man as he begins correctly to perceive his real situation. Hence the transformation foreseen in the Marxist's apocalypse is not escapist; rather, it reveals an awareness of the contradictions of life experience and constitutes an attempt to work out the contradictions in the physical, material world.

Perhaps the most significant point made in *Gathering the Winds* involves the author's assertion that "crisis imagination" customarily identifies the ills of the visionary's social order and seeks to work its cure by creating new images of fertility, beauty, and health "on the far side of a necessary destruction" (p. 181). To see this tendency, so visible in Blake's work, as part of an archetypal pattern of visionary experience is better to define the nature of that particular variety of experience. For, as the author reminds us, the recurrence of such apocalyptic visions reasserts continually the validity of such visions, underscoring their power to inspire confidence, renew dignity, and reorder reality. When Ms. Wilner tells us that the study of apocalyptic vision also "asserts the possibility of the recurrence of this kind of revelation, or transformation, in souls and societies whose need

produces them" (p. 181), we can only be the more reminded of Blake's quotation of Moses in the preface to *Milton*: "Would to God that all the Lords people were Prophets." In spite of its occasional shortcomings, then, not the least of which is the tendency to employ a complex prose style that sometimes obscures what it would illuminate, this is a provocative book, one that provides some valuable insights not just on its four principal figures, but also on the imaginative process itself.

Thomas Weiskel. **The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence.**

Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976. xi + 220 pp. \$12.00.

Reviewed by Michael Fischer

According to Thomas Weiskel, the sublime describes an experience in which man claims to "transcend the human." Whether man encounters the sublime in a literary work or in a natural scene, the distinguishing feature of sublimity is its capacity to transport man beyond the limits of his humanity and the empirical world in which he lives. Such an experience, Weiskel notes, was peculiarly important to the Romantic writers, who sought to preserve the intellectual validity and moral value of sublimity in an age which increasingly confined man to spiritless notions of reality. In *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* Weiskel studies the sublime as it appears in the poetry of the major English Romantic writers and in the theoretical accounts of Longinus, Burke, and Kant. The result is a deeply intelligent, yet sharply limited, analysis.

As indicated by the subtitle of his book, Weiskel's method of analysis borrows extensively, but not uncritically, from the vocabulary and presuppositions of both structuralist and psychological thought. The structuralist orientation of his analysis appears in his initial attempt to describe the sublime and to differentiate what he terms its two major forms, the negative or metaphorical sublime and the positive or metonymical sublime. In Weiskel's view any sublime experience breaks down into three phases. In the first phase, the mind's relation to its object, be it a text or a natural scene, is determinate and familiar: the object (or signifier) offers no unusual obstacles to our comprehension of what it signifies. In the second phase, however, this determinate relation between signifier and signified collapses and the mind faces a radical disconnection between the object and its possible meanings. This second moment in the experience of the sublime is thus one of negation, absence, and alienation, and its emotional accompaniment is astonishment, surprise, and even terror. The painful confrontation with the absence or negation of meaning was, of course, central to the experience of the Romantic writers, and it is the predication of the sublime on the loss of meaning which makes it so important to our understanding of Romantic thought.

This loss of meaning, however, is only temporary in the experience of the sublime, and the third phase of one's encounter with sublimity rectifies the disequilibrium between object and meaning painfully felt in phase two. This resolution takes two forms, depending on the causes which previously disrupted the meaningfulness of the subject's world. If the loss of meaning occurs because of "an excess on the plane of the signifiers" (i.e., in the natural, empirical world), then the resolution posits some kind of access to a spiritual realm beyond what we can grasp with our senses. This form of the sublime is what Weiskel variously terms the negative or metaphorical sublime; he locates its major expression in Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*. In Weiskel's reading of Kant, the empirical imagination in phase two of the sublime faces a natural scene whose signification or meaning eludes its grasp. The very failure of the imagination to comprehend the scene, however, signifies reason's relation to a transcendent, supersensible realm. The imagination's painful inability to understand the scene before it yields to the pleasure and awe we feel when we contemplate reason's capacity to think ideas which lie beyond the natural world. The terrifying indeterminacy of the vast ocean, for example, initially frustrates the empirical imagination's efforts at comprehension or signification but then occasions reason's pleasurable recognition of its capacity to think an idea of totality which even the ocean cannot represent.

A second resolution of the sublime occurs if what Weiskel calls "an excess on the signified" disrupts the mind's sense of meaning. Weiskel variously terms this mode of the sublime egotistical, positive, or metonymical, and he finds its major expression in Wordsworth's poetry. The goal of the egotistical sublime is not the Kantian one of reason's exaltation at the expense of nature but instead the Wordsworthian one of harmony between mind and nature and past and present. Drawing on Geoffrey Hartman's studies of Wordsworth's poetry and on Harold Bloom's theories of poetic influence, Weiskel attempts to show that the second phase of the Wordsworthian sublime involves the mind's painful encounter with what Wordsworth termed the "abyss of idealism," or the state in which the mind's power of constructing meanings seems to find no sanction or support outside itself. Rather than affirm the mind's autonomy and nature's inadequacy as generators of meaning, Wordsworth sought to recover a state of harmony or balance between the two which obviated the need to assert priority to either term. In the final phase of the Wordsworthian sublime the mind is no longer painfully burdened with an unintelligible world or frighteningly identified as the sole source of meaning. Instead the mind works joyfully with nature itself, its ennobling partner and constant ally in the discovery of truth.

The conclusion of Weiskel's structuralist analysis of the sublime suggests that encounters with sublimity illustrate how the Romantic mind reconstructed meaning in the face of the momentary absence of meaning from experience. In structuralist terms, the three phases of the sublime represent

a process of signification, or a movement in which the mind confronts and masters its temporary, but painful, alienation from an intelligible world. After discussing Blake's criticisms of both the Kantian and Wordsworthian sublime, Weiskel goes on to recast his structuralist analysis of the sublime into psychological, largely Freudian terms. The reason for this recourse to psychology apparently lies in his view that the structuralist method describes adequately the individual phases of the sublime but fails to account for the *movement* between the different moments. To describe the diachronic development of the sublime, Weiskel turns to the vocabulary and premises of Freudian and Lacanian psychology, particularly to the central notion of sublimation. The connection between the sublime and sublimation lies for Weiskel in the anxiety felt in the sublime's second phase. Returning to his earlier discussion of the positive and negative sublime, he proceeds to analyze this anxiety in psychological terms and to define its resolution as a mode of sublimation, or a transference of psychic energy from one aim or object to another. A reading of two of William Collins' odes and Wordsworth's *Prelude* tries to particularize this discussion of the psychology of the sublime.

Like his structuralist account of the sublime, Weiskel's psychological description is thorough and thoughtful and resistant to simple summary. He admirably attempts to "wear loosely" his semiological and psychological methodology and he allows the structuralist and the Freudian viewpoints to complement each other in fruitful ways. Although at times the terminology of his discussion seems unnecessary and unhelpful, his book is nevertheless a refreshingly flexible application of structuralist and psychological insights into the Romantic sublime.

What distinguishes Weiskel's study, then, is the critical way in which he uses the terms of his discussion. What limits his analysis, however, is precisely his decision to choose these terms to ground his approach. Weiskel's book radiates intellectual and moral seriousness and he is rightly concerned to think through his relation to his subject. In his view contemporary culture in significant ways marks the end rather than the continuation of Romantic thought and "the ideology of the sublime" occurs to us today as "a moribund aesthetic." "The infinite spaces are no longer astonishing," he notes. "Still less do they terrify. They pique our curiosity, but we have lost the obsession, so fundamental to the Romantic sublime, with natural infinitude . . . the ethos of expansion is over."

Despite Weiskel's evident sympathy with the Romantic writers, the chosen terms of his analysis clearly participate in this current consignment of Romanticism to a project "now pretty much dead." For the structuralist and psychological premises of his investigation have in common a tendency to dismiss as beyond belief or discussion the objective truth of the meanings which the Romantic writers attached to the sublime. The tacit assumption which dominates Weiskel's outlook is that the meanings discovered by the Romantics in their experience of the sublime *must* be seen as subjective

projections or fictive inventions which accordingly solicit analysis in psychological or structuralist terms. Such an outlook, he would concede, is exactly what renders its proponents immune to the sublime: the infinite spaces no longer terrify those who do not *expect* to find meaning genuinely and really there. The Romantic writers did expect knowable meaning from life; this is why they experienced meaninglessness as a terrifying problem to

be resolved through the sublime revelation of genuine truth. For those readers who regard this expectation with skepticism and sympathy, Weiskel's book represents a deeply intelligent discussion of Romanticism in suitably contemporary terms. But for those readers for whom the sublime may yet offer valid insight into "the life of things," Weiskel's study unnecessarily participates in the attenuation of the Romantic faith.

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