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DOCTORAL THESIS

**Sublime Instantiations:
Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Robinson**

ABSTRACT

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Contents

1. Introduction: Sublimity and sublimities.....	2
1.1 The feminine sublime(s): An in-depth overview	9
1.2 Sublimity through time.....	20
1.2.1 Beginnings: Longinus' <i>On the Sublime</i>	21
1.2.2 From Longinus to Edmund Burke.....	24
1.2.3 British influences: Edmund Burke's <i>A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful</i>	26
1.2.4 The ontological shift: Kant.....	34
1.2.5 From Kant to the British Romantics: The importance of imagination.....	40
1.2.6 Postmodern reconsiderations: Lyotard and Derrida.....	46
2. The road to sublimity:.....	54
2.1 Dorothy Wordsworth: From the picturesque to the sublime.....	60
2.1.1 The Wordsworths: A creative exchange between siblings.....	61
2.1.2 Framing the picturesque	77
2.1.3 Dorothy and the picturesque: "A perfect electrometer"	84
2.1.4 The romantic perception and the reconciliation with the picturesque	86
2.1.5 Imagination and the visual arts.....	94
2.1.6 The enclosed picturesque. Visions of interest.....	103
2.1.7 Mirroring the picturesque.....	109
2.1.8 What the thunder said: Subversion of the picturesque water descriptions.....	112
2.1.9 Through the tinted mirror — an examination of colouring.....	116
2.1.10 Dorothy Wordsworth and the pursuit of anti-sublimity	123
2.2 Bridging the gap: Defending the pastoral sublime.....	124
2.2.1 The pastoral sublime. An in-depth analysis	137
2.3 Sappho, from Longinus to Robinson: Sublime reconfigurations.....	143
2.3.1 Abandoning Perdita: The birth of English Sappho	145
2.3.2 The anti-Burkean sublime existence: Reviving Longinus	150
2.3.3 The Longinean mastery and the power of rhetoric	152
2.3.4 A sublime union: (Re)constructing Phaon	156
2.3.5 Mortal passions and lofty pursuits: In defence of Sappho	158

2.3.6 Transferring poetic agency: A sublime denouement.....	167
2.4 Mary Robinson: The road to Romanticism	173
2.4.1 (Dis)possession of authority? Deconstructing the <i>Lyrical Tales</i>	175
2.4.2 From <i>Lyrical Ballads</i> to <i>Lyrical Tales</i> : The road to genius	176
2.4.3 Revisi(ti)ng the Romantic sublime.....	181
2.4.4 Women and Transcendence	185
2.4.5 Sublime and anti-sublime: The dangers of "transcending the man"	188
2.5 Romanticism in collaboration: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Mary Robinson.....	194
2.5.1 The end of an era: Departing Della Crusca	194
2.5.2 Reworking the sublime understanding.....	203
2.5.3 The sublime as a shared endeavour.....	208
2.5.5 Concluding remarks	213
2.6. Affliction and sublimation: On Mary Robinson and Dorothy Wordsworth's diseases ...	216
2.6.1 Ravishing the self: The onset of Mary Robinson's illness.....	216
2.6.2 Facing the diseased body: Robinson and Keats	217
2.6.3 The nightingale and the Romantic imagination	219
2.6.4 Symbolic sublimity: Dissolving the self	222
2.6.5 Dorothy Wordsworth's decline: Between suffering and liberation	231
2.6.5 Entrapment and liberation: Escaping the confines	236
2.6.6 Concluding remarks	240
3. Towards a novel sublime.....	242
3.1 Postmodern sublimity: A changing framework	242
3.2 Facing the masculine sublime. A study on the mechanisms of rejection.....	244
3.2.1 Avoidance and opposition: On fear.....	245
3.2.2 Subversion and resistance	248
3.3 The sublime within confines: exploring enclosed spaces	264
3.4 The sublime Other.....	269
3.5 The sublime performance: Constructing the poetic self.....	276
3.6 Capturing the unrepresentable: Questioning authenticity in sublime depictions.....	284
3.7 Final thoughts: In defence of sublimity.....	308
Conclusions	310
Works Cited	322

ABSTRACT

Keywords: Romanticism, sublime, women writers, Dorothy Wordsworth, Mary Robinson, aesthetics

Sublimity, one of Romanticism's most elusive concepts, continues to fascinate. A salient aesthetic feature for the writers of the Romantic Age, it stands as a potent symbol of their creations' authority and relevance. Through my interest in Romantic literature, I pondered on the relative underrepresentation of women writers during this literary era. As their number was not significantly reduced compared to other literary periods, a dilemma worth examining was the cause of their exclusion from the Romantic canon. My sparse investigation alluded, at least partially, to women's supposed lack of engagement with the sublime. Used as a tool of taxonomical classification, the sublime allows the relegation of works exhibiting their aesthetics to a higher position. An interesting point is the fact that during Romanticism, the sublime was considered inaccessible to women writers. Therefore, I decided to engage in the present scholarly investigation to verify the validity of these assumptions and document female creators' engagement with sublimity. From among the numerous female writers of this time, many with extensive literary careers and significant works, I decided to focus my research on Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Robinson.

The opening chapter examines our contemporary understanding of Romanticism and the sublime, advocating for expanding our views. The two writers chosen for analysis, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Robinson, provide a compelling case. The treatment of the former was plagued by perpetual association with the work of her more esteemed brother, William. Our understanding of her contribution to Romanticism might change if the investigation moves beyond her most famous works, the *Alfoxden Journal* and the *Grasmere Journal*, to the prose writings of her later years and several poems written then. In her turn, Mary Robinson had her value acknowledged during her time and suffers now from a vice in subsequent reception. The blighted reputation of her youth affected the critical understanding of her work, which slowly shunned Robinson to oblivion. Mary's significant literary career reveals her appreciation by and engagement with her contemporaries. At times, their evolution was influenced by her opinions. Familiar with the works of Edmund Burke, engaged in a literary exchange with Coleridge and renowned on the literary stage, Mary used her knowledge to advocate in favour of her worth.

The two creators, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Robinson, occupy different but relevant positions on the literary stage of their age. As a result, the analysis of their engagement with sublimity aims to provide a multifaceted portrayal of its potentiality.

The following chapters constitute the theoretical framework of my thesis. They examine the evolution in time of the sublime. Starting from Longinus, an enigmatic figure who introduced the term and detailed its characteristics, I get to the postmodern considerations of the sublime.

Between Longinus and Burke, numerous theoreticians examine the nature and the scope of the sublime. However, none of them has a more lasting influence than the latter. Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* is intended as a rigorous treaty meant to provide a clear taxonomy of the aesthetic concepts mentioned in its title. The problem with Burke's *Enquiry* lies in its exclusionary nature which extends its influence on the works of the Romantics. On Burke's value scale, men's creations are superior to women's, as only men can pursue the sublime, this crowning achievement of a literary work. Consequently, this affects women writers' creations. Exploring sublimity in their works is supposed to dissuade them from engaging with the concept, according to Burke. On the other hand, sublimity also impacts reception, as women were deemed unsuitable for the sublime's principles. Therefore, criticism retains a biased perception and evaluation of sublimity in women's works. A similar attitude is furthered by Kant's ontological shift where reason is in a pole position in achieving the sublime that is still forbidden to women writers. Under the influence of Kant, Romantics replaced reason with imagination as the leading quality, preserving the same gendered classification as their predecessors, which implicitly marginalises women creators.

An exploration of William Wordsworth's and Samuel Coleridge's connection with sublimity is relevant due to their significant impact on the lives and careers of Mary Robinson and Dorothy Wordsworth. William's interest in the poet's mind and capacity to override nature's will requires special consideration. In his turn, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* predates William Wordsworth's creation of a theory of the Romantic sublime. Although interested in the mental fortitude of the poet, Wordsworth focused on the expanse of imagination without being willing to enable a conscious separation between the beautiful and the sublime. His conception finds a potential application in Dorothy Wordsworth's references and the poetic exchange with Mary Robinson as they negotiate a proper understanding of aesthetics.

Although the sublime never gained a similar impact on the literary market after the Romantic period, it continues to develop and fascinate. Mentioning novel theories means ascertaining a potential link with the conception of Romantic women writers whose understanding of sublimity remains insufficiently explored. As their compatibility with the sublime was questioned, their variations on the concept required a framework of analysis beyond the Romantics' self-imposed limits.

The following chapter opens with arguments favouring Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Robinson as examples worthy of investigation. Their strong connection with Romantic authors

considered canonical nowadays, the intricacy of their creation, and their literary progress constitute premises for this analysis. As their access to sublimity was often hindered for different reasons, they do not provide a unitary development of their aesthetics if compared to their male counterparts. Therefore, investigation provides an in-depth perspective of the female writers and the sublime, dispelling the myth of a single, unitary female sublime everyone adhered to.

Before analysing Dorothy Wordsworth's work in connection to the sublime, it is important to mention her connection with the picturesque, the aesthetical feature dominating her *Alfoxden* and *Grasmere Journals*. Wordsworth's interest in the theories of Gilpin and Price reveals her appreciation of aesthetical theories, her yearning for knowledge and the capacity to apply such concepts in her works, as analysis shall prove. The work on the picturesque functions as a threshold in her evolution. As Dorothy Wordsworth abandons the picturesque, her descent into sublimity is progressive. In its nascent phase, it stays under the sign of what Elizabeth Fay has named the pastoral sublime which allows the journey from awe to grandeur to originate in a domestic ground. The analysis aims to investigate the process of Dorothy Wordsworth's individuation and separation from William's influence.

Similarly, Mary Robinson's early engagement with the sublime involves a separation from the beliefs of her male peers. Willing to oppose Kant's and Burke's belief that sublimity is not intended for women's pursuit, her conception finds legitimacy in the ideas proposed by Longinus, the father of the concept, whose analysis of the sublime included a poem of the Greek author Sappho as a mark of excellence. The analysis of Robinson's series of sonnets, *Sappho and Phaon*, follows the strains of sublimity she reworks in the play and their literary impact. Robinson aims to restore her reputation and Sappho's by exhibiting all characteristics of sublimity dictated by Longinus and inscribing her work in the Miltonian tradition. The analysis of the series and its apotheotic ending reveal Mary Robinson's skill to use sublimity as a tool meant to provide freedom and empowerment to its creators.

Robinson's last volume of poetry, her *Lyrical Tales*, constitutes her love letter to Romanticism. Prefigured as a final attempt to further Robinson's literary relevance, it enters into dialogue with the newly-published *Lyrical Ballads* to provide both a feminine counterpart to this work and give a voice to marginalised characters. The chapter focuses on how *Lyrical Tales* embraces and questions fundamental tenets from the volume of the Lake poets. I intended to charter Robinson's vision on the path towards a novel literary movement. Analysis of the poem *The Hermit of Mont Blanc* presents the ideal of sublimity established in the *Lyrical Ballads*, only to showcase its shortcomings, and advocate for Robinson's moderate approach to aesthetics.

To the individualistic, solitary vision of the sublime, Robinson is willing to present a different, more positive form of engagement with its aesthetics. If the *Lyrical Tales* are her form

of subversion, part of her commitment to change and engage with the sublime discourse is seen in her collaboration with Coleridge. Their connection and the resulting poems reveal her attempts to argue in favour of her understanding of the sublime, which aims at influencing her partner to acknowledge and apply her ideas.

Although they lived and worked alongside the first generation of Romantic poets, the disease that influenced Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Robinson's development creates a sense of kinship with John Keats, a second-generation poet, whose works remain under the sign of his affliction. Keats' interest in the negative capability is opposed to the Wordsworthian sublime, as Keats' respectful approach to the power of nature aims to respect its power and influence. Both Robinson and Keats use the nightingale, the symbolic bird of sorrow, as a means of transport beyond the material ground of suffering. The analysis aims to examine the results of their attempt. In the case of Dorothy Wordsworth, the illness affects her sanity of mind and also impacts her creative output. The investigation into the works of her later years examines the impact of the disease on Wordsworth's mode of expression and her approach to sublimity.

The last chapter of the thesis tackles the quest for a novel sublime. It reiterates theories regarding the concept outside the scope of Romantic sublimity and tests their applicability to the works of the two women writers. Their encounter with a sublime coined as masculine results in their instances of avoidance, opposition, resistance, or subversion. The cases mentioned in their works problematise the possible downfalls of this approach: the insistence on solitude, supremacy over nature, pursuit of heights or admiration of terror as a seminal ground of sublimity.

In other instances, women lack access to the sources of the sublime practised by their male counterparts. As a result, their sublime encounters are also extended to enclosures, seeking those instances in which the poets discover a potential for transcendence despite the presence of boundaries. Moving forward, I propose an analysis of the Lacanian theory regarding *The Mirror Stage*. As language is constructed to privilege a male perspective, I decided to analyse to what extent the tensions extant in the field of language impact the construction of the sublime, a concept which also privileged the male approach.

Relevant are also Levinas' and Mellor's ideas about the Self and the Other. Levinas considers that "the other par excellence is the feminine" (*Existence and Existents* 85). Mellor asserts that "[t]he dualism inherent in Western thought . . . enforced a cultural practice that could only produce the repression and exploitation of the Other" (6). Taking into consideration their views, I considered relevant to examine how the different positioning of women and men in the society of their times also influences their writing, as Wordsworth's and Robinson's lifetime was a period when going against the norm was regarded as an act of subversion. I also question the categoric opposition between the categories of beauty and sublimity, taking into account the fact

that beauty was established as the other to the privileged category of the sublime. Referencing Derrida's *The Truth in Painting*, Maclachlan concludes that that "the transcendental. . . never quite manag[es] to pull itself clear of the empirical, and the empirical never quite free of traces of the transcendental" (1–2), a proposal which can be used to investigate if the boundaries between the two aesthetical concepts remain clearly traced or if the conceptual separation is merely theoretical.

I also took into consideration Lyotard's conception of the *differend* which introduces the supposition that the pursuit of the absolute through sublimity cannot be accurately conveyed aesthetically. I also relied on Lacoue-Labarthe who emphasises that "the sublime is the presentation that there is something unrepresentable" (9). However, as the sublime involves an ascension from the material to the spiritual realm, its presentation in a literary form requires a subsequent attempt to transpose the experience into words. Therefore, I decided to probe into the capacity of the poetic voice to fully translate the sublime effect into discourse, relating to the specific strategies employed by Mary Robinson and Dorothy Wordsworth.

Alan Richardson's theory regarding a neural sublime can be employed in the analysis of other Romantic works than those included in his volume. He talks about William Wordsworth's penchant to participate in self-experiments in order to explain how the sublime might be simply the product of a cognitive illusion as the mind might be tricked by the brain, "causing the senses to swim and the object world to become temporarily unhinged through a perceptual illusion" (34). This process impacts the perception of sublimity seen as a genuine transcendence of the material surroundings, the triumph of the mind in possession of the intuition for the suprasensible. I also relied on Christopher Hitt's definition of the ecological sublime. Hitt believes that sublimity involves transcendence but not of the physical world but of the discursive limits. Unmediated by such constrains, the sublime can be regarded as a veritable union of the observer with the natural surroundings. This perspective conflicts with Kant's or Burke's ideas are present in the works of some Romantic poets for whom dominion over nature is the key of sublimity. Therefore, my inquiry tests whether the creations of Mary Robinson and Dorothy Wordsworth reinforce Kant's and Burke's considerations or tend to verify the assertions made by Richardson and Hitt. It reveals how these women poets were less interested in translating the apex of the experience in words. Instead, they focus on constructing the path to the sublime and, at the moment of revelation, refuse to present it in language. Therefore, they enable the readership to construct their own sublime experience, outside the limitations of language, starting from the base introduced in their work. Sublimity is often understood as an artifice meant to trick perception because it merges with beauty from different vantage points. Imagination amplifies the connection between the self and nature without imposing the control of the poetic will over their surroundings.

Although this study does not seek to draw definite conclusions about the sublime in the works of women writers, this study intends to provide valuable insight into their endeavours during Romanticism paving the way for similar research efforts. Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Robinson are only two voices among the many female writers of the time. The thematic and stylistic intricacy of their works deserves exposure and recognition and contributes to a more nuanced comprehension of the fascinatingly multifaceted Romantic period.

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