"Visionary Dreariness"

Readings in Romanticism's Quotidian Sublime

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For Joachim and Hildegard

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Introduction

Placing the Sublime

For literary critics and historians alike, the central place of the sublime in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art, culture and aesthetics can neither be disputed nor overstated. Samuel Monk, for example, in a landmark treatise focused ostensibly on writers of the Enlightenment but almost from the outset disavowing the constraints of historical periodization, declares that "a study of the sublime in England comes very near being a study of English thought and arts" (3). More recent scholarship has tended to underwrite Monk's unbridled and indeed subsumptive enthusiasm for all things sublime. Jean-Luc Nancy, commenting on the enduring fashionableness of the sublime, offers the following retrospective prognostication about the genesis and impact of sublime analytics: "Beginning with Kant, the sublime will constitute the most proper, decisive moment in the thought of art. The sublime will comprise the heart of the thought of the arts" (50). Quibbling not so much with Nancy's sentiment as with his chronology (and surely his geography), Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla remind their readers of the many *pre*-Kantian disquisitions on sublimity. Their elevation of the eighteenth-century tradition of the sublime to "the principal event" (1) in the history of aesthetics acknowledges the seminal contributions of such British writers as John Dennis, Joseph Addison, John Baillie and, above all, Edmund Burke. An obvious consequence of privileging a specific historical period as central to the tradition is the concomitant promotion of a select number of writers and works, thereby intensifying the debate over primacy. For what happens to Boileau, the niggling critic may ask, or more specifically, to Longinus, if Kant's work or Burke's is to be designated the benchmark of sublime analytics? Can one speak of a tradition of the sublime in England, or indeed elsewhere, without attending to Boileau's foundational translation of Longinus in 1674, through which the word 'sublime' first found its way into critical discourse? Well, as Angela Leighton points out, indeed, one can. Her turn

away from the rhetorical emphasis of *Peri Hupsous* to the naturally inspired theories of the Cambridge Platonists and to Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, which, she suggests, "foreshadows many later descriptions of the workings of the sublime," specifically those of Wordsworth and Coleridge (Leighton 10),[1] marks yet another detour and reversal in the history of the sublime. My point in tracing the debate to this disputed juncture is simply to emphasize how distracting and ultimately unavailing ascriptions of chronology or disputes about textual primacy can be when the subject of study is as multi-faceted and polysemic as the sublime. In this much, then, we may concur with Samuel Monk, not in his blinkered claim that nearly all of English thought tends to the sublime, but rather in his recognition that sublimity—whether as sign or as signified—cannot be reliably pinched between a historian's fingers. The fact that the present study is centered on a specific regional literature and historical period—English Romanticism—is therefore not a reflection of a belief in the uniqueness of the sublime to that period, or still less, of an attempt to elevate Romantic sublimity to a position of theoretical preeminence in the history of aesthetics; what the focus on the Romantic period reflects, rather, is an acknowledgment of the variations and redirections that sublime experiences and expressions underwent in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century literature and life, and the consequent insufficiency of a single overarching analytical framework for an aesthetic of sublimity.

The sublime is, after all, concerned with excess, with that which transcends conventional modes and categories of representation. It attests to what cannot be properly contained or reconciled—what, in effect, cannot be thought at all. Attempts to 'think' it have, as the following passage by Michel Deguy so ably demonstrates, typically brought one to the very extremities of language from which one hangs over an abyss of meaninglessness:

> The sublime is the ephemeral immortality of the point gained, adverse speech snatched from death where the totality of becoming-and-passing-away concentrates itself. Sublimity at once belongs to the mortal curve and surmounts it, overhangs it tangentially like a remarkable 'turning point,' a pineal apex where the body is united with and suspends itself in the soul, a utopia of infinitesimal weightlessness as at the labile peak of the highest leap. Nothing remains 'in the air,' and the fall away from the sublime is fatal. (9–10)

Deguy's focus on the rhetorical or Longinian sublime represents, of course, only one strand in a still more convoluted and tangled body of analysis. As

Stephen Land points out, what makes the sublime such an elusive concept is that it "cannot be confined to either the word or the mind or the world but [. . .] is somehow realized in the meeting of all three" (38). Studies of sublimity, consequently, must be flexible in charting their domain; they must attend not only to theoretical constants and commonplaces but also to what is discursively liminal, what tends to disrupt and even break down the very forms and bounds that have, over hundreds of years of scholarship, endeavoured to give shape to an idea that is by definition formless and boundless.

The present study concerns itself precisely with this discursive and conceptual excess, with a sphere of experience central to and indeed inextricable from Romantic life and writing, but one that has hitherto been excluded from theorizations of the sublime. That sphere, as I would like to suggest, is what we loosely term the everyday, the ordinary, the familiar. By shifting the analytical focus from a sublime of magnitude and vastness, power and fear, to a sublime of small familiar spaces and common natural objects, a sublime of quotidian experiences and consolations drawn from meanest flowers, I propose to place the sublime not merely at "the heart of the thought of the arts" but at the heart of everyday life. Such a radical extension of the boundaries of transcendent experience, an extension, paradoxically, by means of contraction—what in William Blake's poetics is so aptly described as "see[ing] a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower" (1–2)[2]—has a clarifying or distilling effect on our understanding not only of Romantic aesthetics but also, I would argue, of Romantic ideology. Indeed, an expansive revisioning of the sublime on the level described by Blake calls into question one of the most fundamental and persistent critical assumptions about the Romantic period, namely, that its "artistic output," as Roger Cardinal reiterates in a recent essay on the aesthetics of Romantic travel, "was governed by an urge to transcend the familiar and commonplace" (135). Insofar as this assumption, which Jerome McGann attributes to our "uncritical absorption [of] Romanticism's own self-representations" (1), has shaped our understanding of what is not sublime as well as what is, I shall offer it here (in its various expressions) as a context, a contradistinctive backdrop if you will, against which to elucidate an alternate, quotidian experience of sublimity.

Where the ideology of Romantic sublimity is concerned, a governing assumption is that writers of the period were in fact interested in transcending not only the lows of everyday life—what Wordsworth glosses as the "dialogues of business, love and strife" (98)[3]—but the terrifying heights of nature as well, all in the service of freeing the self from corporeal and cultural corruptions, a process culminating in a kind of self-apotheosis. To what extent this ideological framework is in fact a Romantic self-representation or a modern exegetical

paradigm applied to Romantic texts remains a point of some debate and one which the present study will undertake to clarify; for now, let us simply say that its influence on our understanding of the period is profound. Indeed, for most of the twentieth century, an emphasis on conquest and self-aggrandizement has characterized the critical discourse of Romantic sublimity. A cursory survey of three seminal book-length studies of the subject suggests as much. In M.H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism*, a work in which, to borrow Hazlitt's canny assessment of Coleridge, "[t]here is no subject on which [the author] has not touched, none on which he has rested" (62–63), encounters between the Romantic subject and nature's terrifying sublimity are presented as analogical reworkings of the Book of Revelation. As Abrams contends, "the Scriptural Apocalypse is assimilated to an apocalypse of nature; its written characters are natural objects, which are read as types and symbols of permanence in change" (107). Significantly, the role of the poetic imagination in these interchanges with supernature is elevated to that of a messianic "Redeemer" (119), which, by thwarting the threats and dangers of a sublime landscape, restores to the mind its lost paradise of sovereignty. John Jones's *The Egotistical Sublime*, essentially a reinterpretation of Keats's criticism of Wordsworth, likewise makes claims for the "larger landscape" (95) of the poet's mind—a topographic imagination—that somehow comprehends and contains the splendour of nature's mightiest prospects. For Jones, as for Abrams, the sublime is conceived as an assertion of the powers of imagination over those of nature, a subsumption, in effect, of the objective by the egotistical. Thomas Weiskel, finally, also considers the interrelated powers of the poetic imagination and the self in *The Romantic Sublime*. While his nuanced treatment of the Wordsworthian sublime does not confine itself solely to the Gondo Ravine and Mount Snowdon passages of *The Prelude*, his reading of these conventionally transcendent encounters borrows from both Abrams and Jones by foregrounding the role of a subsumptive or sublimating ego which "melts the formal otherness of things and reduces them to material or to substance" (59). It is only through the incorporation of natural grandeur, Weiskel argues, that "the Romantic ego approaches godhead" (62).

Clearly encoded in these three readings of the Romantic sublime is the language of Burkean and Kantian aesthetics and the concomitant assumption that the Romantics in large part simply adopted their formulations of transcendent experience, centered as they are on encounters with objects or phenomena that by their magnitude and vastness exceed the subject's capacity to represent them internally, thereby inducing a sense of awe or admiration. Although inspired ostensibly by the sublime object, this awe or admiration is ultimately reflected back upon the subject, given her/his capacity to withstand,

despite fear, the surpassing might of supernature. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful,* Burke describes this moment of sublime self-exaltation as

> a sort of swelling and triumph, that is extremely grateful to the human mind; and this swelling is never more perceived, nor operates with more force, than when without danger we are conversant with terrible objects; the mind always claiming to itself some part of the dignity and importance of the things which it contemplates. (74–75)

Given that Burke throughout the *Enquiry* links the sublime to the divine, to the ultimate source of infinity (Brooks 17), the sublime encounter may be understood as enabling the subject to establish an affinity not only with the sublime object but also with the perceived presence behind it. What begins as fear, then, culminates in a subjective "triumph," a sensible participation in the power behind all "terrible objects."

For Kant, that power is associated not vicariously but directly with the subject. Indeed, his conception of sublime pleasure in the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* is reducible to a kind of egoistic satisfaction brought about by the mind's—specifically, the imagination's—capacity in the face of unlimited magnitude (mathematical sublime) and power (dynamic sublime) to assert its independence of these forces. Where Burke distills the sublime to a communion with divine otherness, Kant characterizes it as a recognition of transcendent power within:

> The astonishment amounting almost to terror, the awe and thrill of devout feeling, that takes hold of one when gazing upon the prospect of mountains ascending to heaven, deep ravines and torrents raging there, deep-shadowed solitudes that invite to brooding melancholy, and the like—all this, when we are assured of our own safety, is not actual fear. Rather it is an attempt to gain access to it through imagination, *for the purpose of feeling the might of this faculty in combining the movement of the mind thereby aroused with its serenity, and of thus being superior to internal and, therefore, to external, nature,* so far as the latter can have any bearing upon our feeling of well-being. (121, emphasis added)

In this interaction between natural and mental "might," the imagination, though unable to represent external vastness internally, nonetheless refuses subjection to the influences of nature and thus "locate[s] the absolutely great only in the proper estate of the Subject" (Kant 121). This idea of a

subjective triumph over objective nature, intimated by Burke's analysis and more fully elaborated by Kant, lies at the heart of our critical conceptions of Romantic sublimity.

I will call this the mountaintop paradigm of the sublime, given its dual focus on the grandest aspects of nature and the aggrandizement of the Romantic subject. The effect of this paradigm on the direction of Romantic studies has been to designate a select number of writers and texts as essential to the canon, with the sublime becoming, as Theresa M. Kelley observes, "the arbiter of greatness in Romantic poems" (135). For the better part of the twentieth century, that has meant foregrounding the 'big six'—Wordsworth, Blake, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats—and tracing the essence of sublimity in their works. The aforementioned studies by Abrams, Jones and Weiskel draw their examples almost exclusively from this list and in fact even pare it down somewhat. Neither Abrams nor Jones, for instance, includes Byron, Shelley or Keats in his discussion of the sublime, and Weiskel entirely excises Blake from his thesis, given the poet's "perverse [. . .] insistence that only when vision is determinate, minute, and particular does it conduct to or contain infinity" (67). "[Blake's] sublime," Weiskel contends, "is not the Romantic sublime" (67). Notwithstanding such individual discriminations, the main thrust of our modern speculations on Romantic sublimity has tended, at least until recently, to distill the concept to a few salient examples or literary moments. A typical list might include Wordsworth's mountain-top rambles in France, Italy and Wales, the mythic scope and energy of Blake's post-lapsarian cosmology, Coleridge's opiate visions of stately pleasure-domes, the Byronic pre-occupation with transcendent solitude, Shelley's titanic depictions of suffering, rebellion and redemption, and Keats's poetic encounters with idealized or sublimated otherness. Not surprisingly, what these examples reveal about the Romantic subject has tended to the formation of yet another stereotype: that of the lone wanderer, usually male, who, exhausted by the grind of his diurnal round, seeks solace, refreshment or inspiration in the primeval purity of nature, and there discovers some trace of transcendent otherness, often gendered female, with which he communes and by which he is transformed, even if only for a moment. Until recently, this was the governing narrative of self and sublimity in Romantic poetics. Writers whose conceptions of subjectivity and the sublime fall somewhat outside the parameters of this theoretical framework, have, as Vincent de Luca notes in his study of Blake, been largely neglected by critics (3).

With the recent burgeoning scholarly interest in the works of lesser-known and hitherto marginalized Romantic writers, particularly working-class and women poets,[4] the focus and direction of sublimity theorists has

begun to change. Feminist critics in particular have challenged the ascendancy of a sublime aesthetic built predominantly on, and continuing exclusively to foreground, the works of male writers. Their responses may be distilled into two general exegetical strategies: a rejection of the supremacy, relevance and efficacy of a sublime aesthetic or, conversely, the establishment of a specifically feminine sublime. Elizabeth Fay's *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism* is clearly built upon the former strategy. In attempting to account for the absence of a sublime poetics among Romantic women writers, Fay argues that women were precluded from contributing meaningfully to the discourse of sublimity on the basis of direct discriminatory practice by their male peers.[5] Not only was it "usual for a woman writer claiming to have experienced the sublime to be mocked by her male contemporaries," but

> [w]omen were generally held to be biologically unfit for the sublime even when some did practice it, because men writers continued to portray women as incapable of real thought or imagination, and particularly incapable of vision. (14)

Significantly, when characterizing the sublime of the High Romantics, Fay does not associate it with either real thought, imagination or vision; on the contrary, its attempted leaps of transcendent thought end, in her estimation, in heaps of "silly emotion" (14). Thus, although the sublime, as a specifically "male achievement gained *through* women as female objects, [. . .] is closed off to women writers" (14), Fay offers little cause for bemoaning that loss. If anything, her argument intimates that female readers may likewise wish to close themselves off from the sublime.

In opposition to this view, critics like Barbara Freeman and Anne K. Mellor reassert the centrality of the sublime to an understanding of Romantic (and modern) aesthetics by positing a category of transcendent experience to which women not only had access but which they shaped exclusively. In *The Feminine Sublime* Freeman charts a middle course between Wordsworthian sublimity, which she claims "consume[s] the very otherness it appears to bespeak," and the Keatsean sublime, which "depends upon the self's awareness of its own absence" (8). Drawing on the work of Luce Irigaray, Freeman ascribes to female Romantics an incipient capacity for numinous encounter "in which the self neither possesses nor merges with the other but attests to a relation with it" (9). Particularly in the works of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century novelists like Fanny Burney, Ann Radcliffe and Jane Austen, Freeman notes a tendency "to employ agency in precisely the way that the Kantian sublime defends against" (76). Notwithstanding their

emergent resistance to an inherited discourse of transcendent experience in which alterity is assimilated, female writers in the Romantic era were not, according to Freeman, uniformly successful in establishing a revisionist or transgressive aesthetic. Their use of feminine agency, she argues, is "almost exclusively reactive" (77) and their handling of the sublime verges rather on a parody than an outright rejection of the Burkean and Kantian models (79). For Freeman, the feminine sublime may begin at the turn of the nineteenth century but its full flowering awaits a thorough "disrupt[ion] [of] the oppositional structure male/female" (10), a breakdown, in other words, of the very categories that make otherness calculable and containable.

Where Freeman's study distinguishes only traces of resistance to the prevailing norms of aesthetic experience in women's literary Romanticism, Anne K. Mellor's groundbreaking *Romanticism and Gender* posits an outright rejection of those norms and the concomitant establishment of a new category of sublimity inflected by an "ethic of care" (3). Following Arthur Lovejoy's lead in pluralizing the period, Mellor introduces a binary of masculine and feminine Romanticisms, each associated with a distinct version or vision of the sublime. The masculine sublime is essentially the model I have already described, that of the solitary male subject incorporating or assimilating nature as the female other. As an experience it entails "isolation, a struggle for domination, exaltation, and the absorption of the other into the transcendent self" (Mellor 101)—a sequence corresponding precisely to the Burkean and Kantian movement from fear to self-aggrandizement. In opposition to this model of masculine empowerment Mellor propounds a reactionary feminine sublime, which in some instances adopts the traditional machinery of terror but equates it with patriarchal authority, and in others disavows the terms of Burke's and Kant's analyses altogether and instead locates the sublime in the bonds of family and community, and in a co-participatory relationship with the natural other specifically gendered as female. In support of this latter model of sublimity Mellor marshals as evidence the novels of Sydney Owenson and Susan Ferrier, and Helen Maria Williams's commentaries on Wordsworth's "Ode"—a selection which clearly reflects her commitment to a more expansive, inclusive, gender-balanced canon. Yet more than merely attending to previously unknown or marginalized female writers, Mellor's binary of masculine and feminine Romanticisms foregrounds a comprehensive vision of *all* the literature produced in the period. Her models of sublimity in like manner represent an attempt to account for all expressions of transcendent experience, to contain all its variations and permutations, all its inherent excesses, under the rubric of gender. Rather than disrupting the oppositional structure of masculinity and femininity, Mellor makes it the

basis for her exegesis. Rather than questioning the degree to which the masculine sublime or mountaintop model in fact accounts for the various male expressions of sublimity, Mellor assumes its validity and establishes a countervailing model—the other half of sublime experience—on the basis of that assumption. I would like to suggest that such a totalizing and consequently reductive framework cannot but prove unsuitable to a study of transcendent excess. Indeed, even as Mellor attempts to open the field to include the works of previously marginalized writers, she excludes many others, both male and female, canonical and non-canonical.

Let me offer three examples of a kind of sublimity that falls clearly outside the bounds of Mellor's proposed binary. The first passage, so central to the Romantic poetics of self, needs perhaps no contextualization:

> At a time
> When scarcely (I was then not six years old)
> My hand could hold a bridle, with proud hopes
> I mounted, and we rode toward the hills:
> We were a pair of horsemen; honest James
> Was with me, my encourager and guide:
> We had not travelled long, ere some mischance
> Disjoined me from my comrade; and, through fear
> Dismounting, down the rough and stony moor
> I led my horse, and, stumbling on, at length
> Came to a bottom, where in former times
> A murderer had been hung in iron chains.
> The gibbet-mast was mouldered down, the bones
> And iron case were gone; but on the turf,
> Hard by, soon after that fell deed was wrought,
> Some unknown hand had carved the murderer's name.
> The monumental writing was engraven
> In times long past; and still, from year to year,
> By superstition of the neighbourhood,
> The grass is cleared away, and to this hour
> The letters are all fresh and visible.
> Faltering, and ignorant where I was, at length
> I chanced to espy those characters inscribed
> On the green sod: forthwith I left the spot
> And, reascending the bare common, saw
> A naked pool that lay beneath the hills,
> The beacon on the summit, and, more near,

> A girl who bore a pitcher on her head,
> And seemed with difficult steps to force her way
> Against the blowing wind. It was, in truth,
> An ordinary sight; but I should need
> Colours and words that are unknown to man,
> To paint the visionary dreariness
> Which, while I looked all round for my lost guide,
> Did at that time invest the naked pool,
> The beacon on the lonely eminence,
> The woman and her garments vexed and tossed
> By the strong wind. . . . (279–316)[6]

I have begun with Wordsworth because he, perhaps more than any other writer of the Romantic era, has been associated with a sublime of mountaintops and grandeur, a self-empowering aesthetic that Keats dubbed "egotistical." In Mellor's binary, Wordsworth is the poster-boy for masculinist transcendence, insatiably consuming nature's mightiest prospects and in the process annihilating the female other. The poet's noted tendency to "unite[] irreconcilable opposites" (de Man 142) is attributed by Mellor to his "arduous repression of the Other in all its forms" (149). Freeman, in like manner, distills the Wordsworthian sublime to a celebration of "the self's triumph over anything that would undermine its autonomy" (21). Whether or not one subscribes to these readings—and, clearly, they have gained currency in scholarly circles—their true exegetical scope has yet to be determined. When applied, for example, to the "spots of time" (XI.258), the first of which is excerpted above, they fail to explain either the inspiration of the sublime moment or its effects on the poet. Centered on common objects, settings and activities, and distinguished rather for their consolatory than self-aggrandizing effects, Wordsworth's "spots" or localized memories owe their sublimity to a perceived effusion of the numinous on the surface of everyday life. Thus a collection of ordinary sights—a pool, a beacon, and a woman bearing a pitcher on her head—is transformed into a scene of "visionary dreariness," a scene no longer amenable to the faculties of representation. Neither the boy nor the adult poet is capable of assimilating the otherness he encounters; still faltering and ignorant long after the moment has passed, Wordsworth can only claim a dim awareness of its power, its effect on "[t]he workings of [his] spirit" (XI.389), and the consequent urge to return to it and "drink, / As at a fountain" (XI.384–5). Significantly, the passage's emotive effect is derived in part from Wordsworth's tendency to evoke and then overturn our expectations of a more traditionally sublime moment. The narrative of recollection

begins with separation, fear, and a symbolic encounter with death, yet none of these constituent elements moves the poet beyond words. The characters inscribed in the earth, the very emblems of supernatural presence, frighten the boy but do not transfix him; it is only on his reascent of the common, when the crisis of fear has abated, that he is truly arrested in his motion. And the source of arrest is not vastness, magnitude, or even death itself, but dreariness, dreariness and life—a lone woman struggling against the wind. In effect, what Wordsworth presents is an unfulfilled, unconsummated gesture to the Burkean machinery of sublime terror, which in turn is supplanted by a moment of quotidian sublimity centered on the things of everyday life. Wordsworth's attention to the everyday, to the wonders clothed in dreariness that are plainly scattered around us, forms a thematic thread running through *The Prelude*, from the raven's nest episode in Book I to the poet's ascent of Snowdon in Book XIII. Indeed, even this latter passage, so often read as a conventional representation of "circumstances awful and sublime" (XIII.76), is marked by a distinctly quotidian sensibility. What the limitless vistas from Snowdon's heights evoke in Wordsworth, almost as an afterthought to "[t]he perfect image of a mighty mind, / [. . .] that feeds upon infinity" (XIII.69–70), is a renewed appreciation for the imagination's capacity to "build up greatest things / *From least suggestions*" (XIII.98–99, emphasis added). Active, robust minds, he concludes, "need not extraordinary calls / To rouse them; in a world of life they live" (XIII.101–102). This aesthetic preoccupation with "least suggestions," with an immediacy of wondrousness, finds perhaps clearest expression in Wordsworth's Prospectus to 'The Recluse,' where commonness—or more specifically, a mind "wedded" to its varied manifestations—is invested with the most sublime potential:

> Paradise and groves
> Elysian, Fortunate Fields—like those of old
> Sought in the Atlantic Main—why should they be
> A history only of departed things,
> Or a mere fiction of what never was?
> For the discerning intellect of Man,
> When wedded to this goodly universe
> In love and holy passion, shall find these
> A simple produce of the common day. (47–55)[7]

This Wordsworthian capacity to trace the fabulous—"Paradise and groves / Elysian"—in "the common day" is also of course juxtaposed in the Romantic period by examples of a more concrete engagement with the

"produce" of commonness. One need, in fact, look no further than to the work of William's sister Dorothy. Reflecting an extraordinarily intimate, precise and lively engagement with sensible reality, her journals and poetry speak to the operation of "a pragmatic domestic imagination" (Levin 169). Dorothy must not, however, be understood as a mere chronicler of daily tedium. Indeed, her recognition of the aesthetic richness of everyday life is as pronounced as William's, even though that richness, as in the following poem entitled "Floating Island at Hawkshead" (c.1820), manifests itself not as islands in the Atlantic but instead as a simple "slip of earth":

> Harmonious powers with nature work
> On sky, earth, river, lake and sea;
> Sunshine and storm, whirlwind and breeze,
> All in one duteous task agree.
>
> Once did I see a slip of earth
> By throbbing waves long undermined,
> Loosed from its hold—*how* no one knew,
> But all might see it float, obedient to the wind;
>
> Might see it from the verdant shore
> Dissevered float upon the lake,
> Float with its crest of trees adorned
> On which the warbling birds their pastime take.
>
> Food, shelter, safety, there they find;
> There berries ripen, flowerets bloom;
> There insects live their lives and die—
> A peopled *world* it is, in size a tiny room.
>
> And thus through many seasons' space
> This little island may survive,
> But nature (though we mark her not)
> Will take away, may cease to give.
>
> Perchance when you are wandering forth
> Upon some vacant sunny day
> Without an object, hope, or fear,
> Thither your eyes may turn—the isle is passed away.

> Buried beneath the glittering lake,
> Its place no longer to be found,
> Yet the lost fragments shall remain
> To fertilize some other ground.[8]

Bearing in mind William's subversion of the conventional machinery of sublime encounter in the first spot of time, we may say that Dorothy here effects an even more radical transgression of traditional aesthetic categories. Despite adorning her textual landscape with a verdant shore, blooming flowerets and a glittering lake and thereby gesturing to a poetics of beauty, she proceeds to make a dissevered lump of earth—the epitome of dreariness—the especial object of attention and the locus, ultimately, of sublime wonder. What makes dreariness so wondrous in this case is its apparent *un*commonness, its rare and brief appearance on the surface of everyday life. Indeed, Dorothy's description of the island is informed almost from the outset by an understanding of the transience of this "peopled world"—it will, as she relates, pass away. In accepting the island's passing as inevitable reality, Dorothy does not, however, diminish the sublime mystery of the event. Nature's reasons for engulfing this tiny world are not elaborated; the island is simply taken away, ceased to be given, not capriciously but according to some inscrutable rhythm or round (like that in which William's Lucy is rolled with her rocks and stones and trees). What brings this seemingly insignificant and unspectacular phenomenon into the realm of the sublime is Dorothy's perception of those "Harmonious powers" in nature that establish balances between passing and renewal, compensations, if you will, for apparent loss. For Dorothy, nature's compensatory economy expresses itself in the fact that, though the island's fragments are lost from view, they "remain to fertilize some other ground." What is lost remains: a fitting paradox of sublime excess just below the surface of this "world of life."

Like Dorothy Wordsworth, John Clare reveals in his work an uncommon fascination with common things. His prose fragments, journals and even his poems read at times like the field notes of a pioneer botanist or ornithologist, so rigorous are they in their commitment to particularization and detail. As Edward Strickland suggests, Clare is "the most purely empirical of the Romantic poets" (142). His is not, however, simply a mimetic aesthetic. Indeed, as the following excerpt, entitled 'Dewdrops,' from Clare's Northampton Asylum Notebooks illustrates, his empirical depth of focus is counterbalanced by a sense of childlike awe and wonder, a sense (if I may tweak a modern label) of realism's magic: