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THE TRAPS OF THE SUBLIME

The darkness of the time is an image of disorientation. It is a time when God enters the mind: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob or perhaps the mask of Dionysus... The problem with the vertical intrusion of the various orders of the nonrealized is that we do not know what realm of discourse has inserted its claim through the wound in consciousness.

Charles E. Winquist, *Epiphanies of Darkness*

Review of Clayton Crockett's *Interstices of the Sublime. Theology and Psychoanalytic Theory*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. 232 pp. ISBN 978-0823227228. Paper, \$26.00.

The new book of Clayton Crockett, *Interstices of the Sublime*, can be regarded as a sequel to his *Theology of the Sublime*, where he attempted an analysis of the Kantian concept of the sublime as a pivotal notion of modern religious experience. This time Crockett concentrates on the discourse of the sublime created within the broadly conceived movement of theoretical psychoanalysis. "This is not a 'scholarly' book on 'Freud', or on 'Lacan' - Crockett says in the introduction - but rather a book that seeks to inscribe Freudian and Lacanian thought into theological thinking in such a way that unsettles both theology and psychoanalysis".¹ This declaration of subversion sets a master tone to his whole enterprise whose main purpose is, indeed, *to unsettle*: shake theologians out of their outdated conceptuality, traumatize their minds, and open them to this particular "variety of religious experience" that is brought with the sublime, especially the psychoanalytic one.

Unlike many more orthodox theologians, who write off psychoanalysis as a thoroughly atheistic science, Crockett believes in its "psychotheological" potential, i.e. in its power to renew our thinking about God. But the outcome of this project is not at all obvious, rather deeply "unsettling" - and perhaps not in the boldly positive sense Crockett attributes to his subversive declarations. The psychoanalytic sublime wanders off, in a typically Freudian anarchic style of *Sinnwandlung*, into strange regions that not only defy concepts of traditional theology, but also, at much more fundamental level, defy its *affects*. Crockett may have discarded most of the theological conceptual apparatus - he deliberately does not use such terms as "monotheism", "pantheism", "emanationism", or

¹ Clayton Crockett, *Interstices of the Sublime. Theology and Psychoanalytic Theory*, Fordham University Press: New York 2007, pp. 6-7. From this time on pagination in text.

even “revelation” – but he had done so in order to reveal more basic “materiality of affects” that go together with religious experience. “Theology – he says after Tillich, his master and most direct precursor – is our ultimate concern: it concerns our being and non-being. Freed from dogma and unharnessed from any positive revelation, theology becomes a powerful interrogative force for asking urgent and important questions” (185). My dispute with Crockett will thus not operate on highly abstract conceptual level – for instance, I will not reproach him for his rather troubling pantheistic tendencies – but will try to stay on the level of affectivity as, precisely, the sphere of “ultimate concern”. My thesis will be that what Crockett proposes as a new religion of the sublime – or, as he calls it himself in his previous work, “sublime religiosity”² – is essentially incapable of sustaining these affects, for it evokes the very opposite of concern. The predominant affective result of the sublime is terror, apathy, paralysis, and resignation. And furthermore, I will claim that whatever is left of the “ultimate concern” in his thinking comes from no other source than the “positive revelation” for which, apparently, there is no longer place in Crockett’s theology.

God of Kant, Hegel, Lacan

The author of this review is not a theologian. She is a philosopher interested in religion – let’s say, a quite skeptical philosopher who, witnessing the struggle between radical postmodern theologians, coming from the side of Mark C. Taylor, Jack Caputo, Thomas Altizer, Charles Winquist, and Clayton Crockett on the one hand, and Radical Orthodoxy of John Milbank and his pupils on the other, cannot help but wonder what happened to *religion* itself, which was supposed to be the issue at stake. It is perfectly clear what Crockett wants to achieve in his theologico-psychoanalytical approach to the sublime: he wants to renew theological vocabulary by bringing in the apparatus of psychoanalysis, preferably of the Lacanian sort, and open theology to all the disquieting problems that come along with psychoanalytic Suspicion. “I place myself within a particular theological tradition – Crockett defines his position in *A Theology of the Sublime* – which is a radical Tillichianism that includes American Death of God theology” (TS, 5), where the latter is perceived not as a “judgment upon the reality of God in any ultimate way”, but rather as a theology of the death of the *concept* of God, which thus liberates “theological discourse to investigate other terms, other powers and other expressions for their sense and significance” (ibid.), among them the notion of the sublime. It is also perfectly clear that, as in *A Theology of the Sublime*, he wishes to distance himself from the project of Radical Orthodoxy which distrusts the discourse of the sublime both in Kantian and Freudian version; psychoanalysis, says Phillip Blond, Crockett’s favorite adversary, is “an essentially atheistic discourse that cannot reconcile a theological conceptuality”.³

² Clayton Crockett, *A Theology of the Sublime*, Routledge: London & New York 2001, p.105. From this time on in the text as TS.

³ Phillip Blond, Introduction to *Post-Secular Philosophy*, Routledge: New York and London 1998, p. 45. “For Milbank – writes Crockett in his former book, wholly devoted to the defense of Kant’s intuition of the sublime as a truly modern religious category –

"The problem with any variety of orthodoxy is that it is always Right" (8), Crockett sneers, implying not just political conservatism of his opponents, but also a timid and "cosy" image of God as the Supreme Good that provides us with the regulative idea to lead, as Charles Taylor would have it, an essentially "good life". "Working through the complex interrelationship of sublimation, creation, and the sublime in this book – writes Crockett – unfortunately does not reassure us that God loves and cares for us, but it does open a space for serious theological reflection" (17). Fine – but by distancing himself so thoroughly from the "orthodox" image of God as the rational foundation of created world, Crockett risks falling into the opposite extreme: the dark vision of wild universe, spawned (for the word "created" is not really applicable here) by a mad, bad, essentially irrational deity, which perhaps no longer truly deserves to be called God, and his cult religion. This would probably not scare Crockett off, *not yet*; after all, he is quite eager to embrace this new sublime divinity, however irrational it may seem to his more orthodox antagonists. Yet, he nonetheless should be concerned about one consequence of this maneuver, which perhaps is not so easy to swallow. By distancing himself so radically from any "illusions" of traditional piety, which would like to see in God the secure principle of creaturely order and morality, he risks an overkill of the critical effect, which in the end gives us an image of God that cannot command *any* emotional attitude: no awe, no hope, let alone love. By trying to revive the language of theology, he may in fact achieve a paradoxically reverse result: instead of giving us a "living God", who would burst out transgressively beyond the clichéd images of traditional piety, he ends up with the driest version of the Pascalian "God of philosophers", who may be strange, even deeply uncanny, but inspires no affection, no "fire" on the side of his potential believers. Or, one should rather say that these affections are just the opposite of the Pascalian "fiery" mixture of awe, hope, and love: they are the Kantian "stony" combination of terror, apathy, and finally – total indifference.⁴

modern sublimity refers to a viewpoint which loses sight of God's transcendence in a rational and positive way, and can only perceive God as terrifying and irrational. Unfortunately, Milbank and others fail to understand the Kantian sublime profoundly enough, because they take it as referring more to an external object than a process internal to thinking" (TS, 3).

⁴ I have no place here to go into the details of Crockett's analysis of the Kantian sublime, but one thing needs to be said on this subject, because it is crucial also to his later approach to the psychoanalytic version of sublimity: in his interpretation of mathematical and dynamical sublime, Crockett stubbornly neglects to mention that the peculiar "negative pleasure", which befalls the mind in the second case, derives from a mixed experience of both: nature, appearing in its meaningless "mathematical" vastness, and the antithetical power of moral freedom that counteracts the sheer natural force, thus producing the "dynamical" tension within the experience of the sublime. In his recent work on the history of the sublime, Will Slocombe nicely summarizes this complex Kantian dynamics: "Thus, while experiencing the sublime moment, man is both overcome by nature and overcomes it"; *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern. The (Hi)Story of a Difficult Relationship from Romanticism to Postmodernism*, Routledge: New York & London 2006, p. 41. It is only this surge of a powerful moral antithesis that gives mind an elevation capable of balancing the "displeasure" in face of the "natural

Crockett's thesis is clear. For him, the sublime is the most plausible modern candidate for a deity whose traditional formula seems now long dead and exhausted: "What I am calling the Freudian sublime – he says – indicates two distinct tendencies in Freud's thought: the notion of sublimation on the one hand, and trauma – or the death drive – on the other. These two processes cannot be thought separately, but must be seen as profoundly interrelated. Traumatic events open up holes – interstices that must then become stitched together in a complex process of sublimation that makes us who and what we are... The psychoanalytic sublime refers to the uncanny and disorienting feeling of discord at the base of conscious reflection. This uncanny feeling before, behind, or other than conscious intentionality makes all determinate conscious reflection tremble, and this is a religious sensation or experience that demands honest theological reflection and articulation" (11). But isn't this identification of the unsettling qualities of the uncanny-sublime, which makes our conscious thought tremble, with the religious sensation *per se* a little too hasty? Is truly *everything* that disturbs our precarious sense of symbolic order a *religious* experience? Slavoj Žižek, who looms large in Crockett's book as one of the central figures of inspiration, would certainly disagree and immediately proceed to quote his favorite guide to Christianity, G. K. Chesterton, who, in one of his detective stories, "The Oracle of the Dog", sarcastically describes all this interest in the uncanny as superstitious and – because of that – deeply irreligious. The obscurities of uncanniness, says Chesterton, only serve to evade the deepest of all mysteries: the plain fact that "He was made Man".⁵ And one does not have to

magnitude"; thus, if the sublime in Kant is a *disruption* of the totality of thinking, it is also an *empowering assertion*, experienced on a higher level as a power of ethical law. Confronted with abysses and largeness of nature, not yet aided by this other antithetical sublime, mind feels stupefied and slowly falls into apathy. This is precisely why Paul de Man, in his brilliant analysis of Kant's notion of *das Erhabene*, where he rejects the inner "moral" sublime as a fiction, focuses mostly on what he calls "the stony vision" of Kant's mathematical sublime and the special affects it produces: numbness, radical passivity, indifference. These are, he claims, the *proper* affects of the sublime, freed from the "fiction" of the transcendental power of moral freedom; moreover, these are the affects that approximate the experience of death itself (see Paul de Man, "Kant's Materialism" in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1996). Since Crockett also discards these antithetical emotions as fictitious and focuses mostly on the disruptive effect of the sublime, it would seem that he too should assume the "affective" consequence of this purified, or radicalized experience of the sublime as described by de Man. But this is precisely what he is very reluctant to do – as if he felt from the start, and rightly so, that these "proper" *lethal* affects of the sublime experience are not particularly promising from the religious point of view.

⁵ "It's the first effect of not believing in God – says Father Brown to his young companion – that you lose your common sense and can't see things as they are. Anything that anybody talks about, and says there's a good deal in it, extends itself indefinitely like a vista in a nightmare. And a dog is an omen, and a cat is a mystery, and a pig is a mascot and a beetle is a scarab, calling up all the menagerie of polytheism from Egypt and old India... - and all because you are frightened of four words: 'He was made Man'", G. K. Chesterton, *Father Brown*, Wordsworth Classic: Ware, Hertfordshire 1992, p. 188.

follow either Žižek or Chesterton completely (I don't) to see that they have a point. Here, the uncanny sublimities *replace* God, *emerge in his stead*; not only they are not continuous with the religious message of revelation but propose an altogether different kind of cult. Crockett, however, builds an implicit transmission line which suggests that the sublime, whose final appearance occurs in Lacan, is a modification of what we once used to name "God": "And since the sublime represents what we can know now as God - he says quite bluntly in *A Theology of the Sublime* - one can draw the further consequence, along with Lacan, that God is (the) unconscious" (TS, 111). *The Interstices of the Sublime* only resume and develop this rather dubious figure of substitution: "The Kantian sublime - writes Crockett - thus passes into the Freudian unconscious, and reappears, most explicitly and powerfully, in the sense of the uncanny that disturbs conscious thinking from the inside. A theology that attends to psychoanalytic reality, then, must interrogate such traces of divinity that are expressed in primary processes, following Lacan's famous claim that 'God is unconscious'" (35). Yet, this "passing" is a mysterious trope whose status remains unclear throughout the whole book: is this a substitution, which fulfills all the structural features of its predecessor? Is this a metaphor, which involves both transformation and continuity with the previous term? Or, perhaps, is this a catachresis, which indicates a radical break with what it replaces? Or - still another option - is this "passing" a series of metonymies that do not have to possess anything deeply substantial in common, and just happen to stand next to one another in historical sequence of modernity?

Crockett evades answering this crucial question which gravely hinders his ambitious project of responding to the modern state of theological emergency. For, can theology proceed *without* what we once used to call religion? Or, in other words: can it find a convincing substitute for its meta-reflection and thus satisfy alternatively the Tillichian desire for "spiritual depth"? Crockett's book definitely, though somewhat tacitly, heads in this direction - i.e. *away* from what both Jewish and Christian tradition names the *religion of revelation* ("God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob") and *toward* a postmodern version of the "(Dead) God of Philosophers" as the founder of the *religion of the sublime*. And despite Crockett's efforts (rather half-hearted on his part) to maintain some sort of implicit continuity between these two forms of religiosity, it has to be stated clearly that they are not the same. In fact, it would be hard to imagine a more precipitous difference: the "fire" of revelation has nothing in common with the "stony vision" of the sublime. For, if "theological conceptuality" of the former brings in affective associations of life, love, hope, and promise, the latter connects itself naturally with death, nothingness, and resigned *amor fati*.

Thus, if Crockett is right in claiming that the best representatives of the religion of the sublime in contemporary thought are Heidegger and Lacan, then the most natural response to this type of religiosity is, indeed, *Gelassenheit* of the former and "destitution of the subject" of the latter, both based on the Heideggerian demand to "still all desire". For, if we remember what Kant says about the mathematical sublime, which occurs before the dynamical sublime sets it, the only reaction it can extract from the mind watching the shapeless mass of being

is – *apathy*. Before the mind can find in itself the transcendental force of inner freedom that counteracts this creaturely “bad infinity”, suggestive of dark and mysterious abysses, it falls into a stupor: trapped by the sublime enigma of natural being, it loses the power of opposition, gets sucked in, forgets all its desires, hopes and expectations. And, on a meta-level, this is precisely the feeling one gets while reading Crockett’s book: we witness the workings of the theological mind, who watches the spectacle of the mathematical, negative sublime that never breaks into positive, dynamical one, and who, gradually forgetting everything he ever wanted from his God, dissolves in the end into complete disorientation. “Dark forces are at work. Illumination is partial, at best” (187), says Crockett in the last sentence of his book.

Kant, although himself a skeptic denying any possibility of the experience of God, nonetheless uttered his Tillichian cry of “ultimate concern”, and asked: “What may I hope?” – what may I expect from my life, my being, from the very arrangement of the creaturely world?⁶ Crockett, however, can’t even pose this question – but even if he did, he would have to answer: *nothing*. His sublime God is the one who brings about beings and produces meanings, is at the bottom of the processes of creation and signification – but gives no clue as to the purpose of this whole enterprise. All this “process of sublimation” runs in an inscrutable circle of “dark forces at work” that can only be passively witnessed by the “stony gaze”, alternating between “terror” and “apathy”.⁷

The shift from the religion of revelation to the religion of the sublime is thus not a question of historical transmission or translation in which only something gets lost, but affinities prevail. No, this shift indicates a radical change of which Crockett’s book gives, in fact, no account. He constantly tries to establish some translatory ratio between the two, although the effects are far from the convincing. “The Thing, the Other, the Real – he says – these are theological concepts because in psychoanalytic theory they implicate what we understand by divinity, even though they are not simply equivalent to God” (186). This is a very strange sentence, in which Crockett, I think, tries to persuade first himself and then his readers that the translation he has in mind should be easy, even if not fully “equivalent”. But what does this lack of equivalence mean? What are the losses and gains of this not fully equivalent substitution? The points of

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, St Martin’s Press: New York 1965, A805/B833.

⁷ The contrast between the Kantian and the postmodern sublime, over which Crockett somewhat glosses over, is very well captured by Dwight Furrow’s *Against Theory*, whose analysis runs parallel to the deManian interpretation: “Built into the postmodern sensibility is a focus on the reflexivity of the process of presentation. The Kantian sublime acknowledges the unrepresentable, but substitutes for it a fiction that serves the function of a regulative ideal – the hypothesis of natural teleology for humankind. By contrast, the postmodern sublime refuses to become nostalgic by invoking the illusion of a redemptive, final end. Instead, the sublime continually makes reference to the impossibility of presenting the unrepresentable by refusing to reconcile the opposite feelings. The reflective judgment, which can no longer rely on analogy with a universal law, must find its own principle without guidance from the presumption of unity or underlying structure”; *Against Theory. Continental and Analytic Challenges in Moral Philosophy*, Routledge: New York & London 1995, p. 180.

affinity highlighted by Crockett are the following: both God and the triad “Thing-Other-Real” are *beyond representation*, i.e. they cannot be exhausted by the symbolic system, and in this sense they can both be called sublime. Both God and the Lacanian Real can be said to lie at the bottom of *creatio ex nihilo* that leads to emergence of beings and meanings. Also, both are the source of sublimation in the way that they themselves resist symbolization and trigger it as an endless pursuit after the ultimate meaning. This seems to be enough for Crockett: “The sublime is religious – he says – because religion is what resists the attempts of philosophical representation, and this is the paradigmatic theoretical understanding of religion in the modern world” (184). The same insight appeared earlier, in *A Theology of the Sublime*: “As the depth dimension of individual faculties or functions, religion appears as sublime, because one can identify a sphere of or phenomenon as religious only when its self-representation breaks down” (TS, 103). But, is the non-representability the *only* valid criterion here, the only both necessary and sufficient condition of divinity? This syllogism – sublime is the non-representable *per se*; modern religion concerns itself mostly with the non-representable; therefore, sublime is religious – is far from obvious. It looks suspiciously smooth, and its apparent smoothness merely covers up urgent issues of break and continuity of its “passing” that are left unanswered in Crockett’s book.

The Ultimate Antagonism

Not everybody would readily agree that “the sublime is religious” *per se*. And the first thinker coming to mind here is no other than Charles E. Winquist, to whom Crockett devoted his book. In *Epiphanies of Darkness*, a subtle deconstructive analysis of the methodological condition of theology “in dark times”, Winquist builds a strong tension between what he calls an inherited “concept of God”⁸, now bereft of any experiential content, and experiential “primal phenomena of our existence” (ibid., 8), or a disquieting “psychological reminder” (ibid., 9) that may suggest some vertical dimensions of spiritual depth, but cannot be easily identified with the former. “Our problem – he says – is not the absence of God but the presence and reality of the concept of God” (ibid., 7). We can thus explore the sublime abysses of the Lacanian “God as the unconscious”, but we can never be sure what kind of discourse “inserts its claim through the wound in consciousness” (ibid., 16). We can scrutinize all the “dizzying” experiences that unsettle, displace, decenter and traumatize our *cogito*, but we cannot tacitly imply that they will reconnect us with the lost object of theology, “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”, who still lingers in God’s theological concept. Something else may slip into the place of wound, and, as the epigraph to this review asserts, put on “the mask of Dionysus” (ibid., 16).

Simon Critchley, an avowedly secular thinker, in *Very Little... Almost Nothing*, the essay devoted to the birth of nihilism out of the spirit of modernity, claims, in fact, something very similar to Winquist: the modern career of the nihilistic

⁸ Charles Winquist, *Epiphanies of Darkness. Deconstruction in Theology*, Fortress Press: Philadelphia 1986, p. 7.

sublime, conceived as a mysterious void-absence-abyss, occurs due to the decline of the traditional image of God. Not only does it not translate any of the older religious spirit into new moulds of modern sensibility, but breaks with them altogether, replacing them with a completely new experience: "The proper name for this breakdown of religious orthodoxy is modernity", says Critchley,⁹ and the sublime, which starts to pop out in romantic writings after Burke and Kant is the best expression of this breakdown. In this sense, Critchley's thesis is also almost identical with Blond's - with this obvious difference that Critchley fully asserts this transformation and goes on to identify the modern nihilistic sublime with the experience of death, which, according to him, plays a crucial role in what Jean-Luc Nancy calls deeply secular "finite thinking" of modernity.¹⁰

This uniquely postmodern link between sublime, nothingness, and death, seen together as a strongly anti-religious combination - the same one that constitutes a recurrent motive in Crockett's book - finds a perfect illustration in Lyotard: "In Burke as well as Kant - he writes in "Complexity and the Sublime" - the sublime emerges when there is no longer a beautiful form. Kant himself said that the feeling of the sublime is the feeling of something *das Unform*. Formless. The retreat of rules and regulations is the cause of the feeling of the sublime. That's what I was trying to say with the idea of death. It is also the death of God".¹¹ For Lyotard, the sublime is synonymous with the death of God; it is a shapeless abyss, truly a *tomb of God*, who no longer hovers over it as a triumphant spirit of *Genesis*. This time, it is the abyss, *tehom*, that triumphs; it is the abyss' decreation and deconstruction that wins over creative *Elohim*.

⁹ Simon Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing. Death, Philosophy, Literature*, Routledge: New York & London 1997, p. 2.

¹⁰ Similarly, Will Slocombe in his already mentioned *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern* claims that relationship between God and the sublime is far more antagonistic than it is portrayed by Crockett. Slocombe connects the promotion of the sublime with the demise of God and elevation of man and his solitary exchange with universe which appears to him as emerging out of chaos, abyss, nothingness, "the dizzy ravine": "The sublime - he says - is only arbitrarily made distinct from nihilism; nihilism is actually a temporally-displaced formulation of the sublime" (op. cit., p. 25). And then: "The simplest way to understand this is to imagine nihilism and the sublime as different sides of the same coin; hold up the coin and those observers facing heads will see heads and those facing tails will see tails, despite the fact that it is the same coin. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the coin had faces of 'man' and 'god' - those who saw the ascent of man in their culture saw the 'sublime' face, whereas those who saw the descent of God saw the 'nihilistic' face" (ibid., xii). Furthermore, Slocombe sees postmodernity as the culmination of this "atheistic" tradition of the sublime: "The sublime is not some aspect of the postmodern; rather, the postmodern is an aspect of the sublime" (ibid., xi). One could easily expand the list of the authors who rather emphasize the antagonism between God and the sublime instead of noticing any kind of, however difficult, continuity: for instance, Phillipe Lacou-Labarthe in "Sublime Truth" (in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, ed. J. S. Libbrett, State University of New York: Albany 1993) and, quite recently, Paul Gordon in his *Tragedy after Nietzsche. Rapturous Superabundance* (University of Illinois Press: Urbana & Chicago 2001).

¹¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Complexity and the Sublime", in *Postmodernism: ICA Documents 4 & 5*, ed. Lisa Appiganesi, Free Association Books: London 1986, p. 11.

An analogous antagonistic reversal of “theological” roles is also spotted by Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Alluding to Hegel’s definition of Judaism as the religion of the sublime, Žižek dismisses it as no longer valid because the modern sublime had already radically changed its meaning: “The Sublime – he says – is no longer an empirical object indicating through its very inadequacy the dimension of a transcendent Thing-in-itself (Idea) but an object which occupies the place, replaces, fills out empty space of the Thing as the void, as the pure Nothing of absolute negativity – the Sublime is an object whose positive body is just an embodiment of Nothing”.¹² The sublime, therefore, no longer alludes to God as the non-representable Idea whose image is strictly prohibited (as in Hegel), but points to the Void which is a principle strictly antagonistic to God, although equally beyond representation. It would thus follow that calling sublime religious on the sheer basis that it is non-representable, *just like God*, is not enough, or simply misses the point, because the abyss-void-nothingness is also non-representable, and, at the same time, *is not God* – at least if we are to believe the first fragment of *Genesis*. In the “passage” to postmodernity, religion of the sublime undergoes a radical transformation; it no longer serves to describe certain aspect of the religion of revelation (most of all Judaism, especially in interpretations of Hegel and Herder), but heads towards establishing a new (or rather, the most archaic) form of religiosity which in the agon between “spirit” and “waters” takes the side of the latter, privileging the pre-creational abyss.

To highlight this conflict further we could also evoke Derrida’s “Faith and Knowledge” where he draws a distinction between the “Graeco-Abrahamic hybridization”, i.e. the tradition of *via negativa* that postulates a divine transcendence *epekeina tes ousias*, and a quite different, more secretive thought, which bases itself on the concept of *chora*: “*Chora*, ‘the ordeal of chora’ – he says pointing to theoretical difficulties that surround this notion – would be... the name for place, a place name, and a rather singular one at that, for that spacing which, not allowing itself to be dominated by any theological, ontological, or anthropological instance, without age, without history and more ‘ancient’ than all oppositions, does not even announce itself as ‘beyond being’ in a accordance with a path of negation, a *via negativa*”.¹³ *Chora* is a place, an abyss, a void, a nothingness (in terms of *me on*, not the absolute nothing of *ouk on*) in which all being rests in latent state; it cannot be said to exist strictly “beyond being”, because as a source of constant emanation, *chora* does not delimit itself clearly from what it produces. Transcendence, on the other hand, is “beyond being”, because there is no continuity between the transcendent, separated God and the created world. Both however, are to some extent sublime, for both are – although in different, perhaps even antagonistic, ways – beyond representation.¹⁴

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso: London 1994, p. 206.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, Routledge: New York & London 2002, p. 58.

¹⁴ A similar notion of *chora* as a primary, indefinite “name place”, appears in Julia Kristeva, whose psychotheological insights are often quoted by Crockett. Kristeva gives “*chora*” a subtly feministic overtone and plays it against the transcendent male God of

The Messianic Good

If we maintain this rather antagonistic perspective, pace Crockett's attempt at continuity, we will see immediately what is at stake in this confrontation between religion of revelation and the religion of the sublime. The one obvious difference is *ethical*: the God of revelation is – or, at least, claims to be – good, whereas the postmodern, “abyssal”, Lacanian Thing–Other–Real is morally indifferent, or, as Crockett himself enthusiastically asserts, “beyond good and evil”. Crockett argues that assuming God's goodness is a part of the worldly utilitarian ethics which finds a natural ally in the naïve piety – while any bolder religious thought, not afraid to walk out of “clean, well-lighted rooms” of traditional theology (184), must be prepared for an ethical *vertigo* in face of a truly sublime God. This part of the book in which Crockett tries to secure his vision of the divine “beyond good and evil” is actually the least convincing, and not accidentally so, for it touches the very blind spot of Crockett's thinking: the complete omission on his part of the messianic element, which plays no negligible part in the religion of revelation and, as it seems, cannot be translated *in any form* into the religion of the sublime. “The Thing cannot be equated with God thought as the Supreme Good (Being) – says Crockett – because that would merely recall the Sovereign Good of utilitarian ethics, which the Thing dislocates. God as the Supreme Good, which organizes all the human goods, is a product of the symbolic order of linguistic representation” (57).

Crockett's definition of a “good God” as an outcome of the utilitarian ethics, designed to run smoothly the sphere of the symbolic, is incredibly biased, and simply cannot give justice to the idea of messianic goodness that makes of revelation something infinitely more than just an act of cognition – it makes of it a *promise*. A promise that generates change, movement, history, and finally *Heilsgeshichte* itself – a promise that offers a future redemption. This redemptive dimension is totally absent in Crockett's book. And no wonder, since the Lacanian Real may be responsible for sublimation as both creation of beings and meanings – but it can offer no redemption. And this precisely where our ways – mine and Crockett's – must part for good: in his attempt to revivify old theology, he simply – though imperceptibly to himself – changes confession. He becomes a believer of the religion of the sublime.

This blind spot resulting in the omission of the redemptive dimension and the idea of the messianic good accounts for the most curious absence in the book: the

the symbolic order. In *Desire in Language* she illustrates this agon between God and Abyss by setting Samuel Beckett, the disenchanted follower of the former, against Giovanni Bellini, whose “dreamy madonnas” point to this other “place”, chora, and the mysteries of the maternal “bonds of love” (see “The Father, Love, and Banishment” as well as “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini” in *Desire in Language. A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. By L. S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press: New York 1980). Both Derrida and Kristeva seem very much aware of the conflict between these two principles, while in Crockett's account they tend to dissolve into one undifferentiated abyss of the postmodern sublime.

absence of Emmanuel Lévinas. Lévinas is substituted here by Jean-Luc Marion, who is somewhat lightly dismissed by Crockett for his non-ontological vision of *Dieu sans l'être*: "God is freed from primarily having to be. Instead God can be thought of primarily as giving and as loving... My critique of Marion is that he disavows any negativity in theology; to preserve an understanding of God as good, Marion is unable to think of God as 'beyond good and evil'" (133; 138). Putting aside the question, whether this Nietzschean tackle is a fair argument against Marion, one still has to remember that Marion's non-ontological argument is but a pale copy of a much more powerful vision: Lévinas' furious attack on ontology, which explains God's *autrement qu'être* in strictly ethical terms as the ultimate messianic Good that cannot be made complicit in the machinery of being. For, if it is to offer a radical promise of messianic hope it cannot ever become part of the already extant totality; it can never be used by its reproductory mechanism, which aims at maintaining the ontological *status quo*. The Lévinasian messianic Good is thus *beyond the symbolic order*, which serves the preservation of the ontological totality of being, but it is not simply *beyond good and evil*. If it is sublime, in the sense of non-representability, it is only because it is good beyond our imagination, which remains bound by ontological rules. Here, sublimity is *not* the decisive criterion; it is rather the side effect of radical goodness, something that Chesterton calls "more good than good and evil"¹⁵, and which constitutes the defining feature of the God of revelation.

One wonders why Crockett did not even consider this messianic option as a hopeful possibility of escaping the pitfalls of traditional theology with its appeasing and rationalizing tendency. Messianic Good, as it can be witnessed in the writings of Lévinas, does not "disavow negativity in theology" (138). Quite to the contrary, it is anarchic and disruptive enough both to suit postmodern taste and cause the anger of the Radical Orthodoxy from which Crockett tries to distance himself.¹⁶ Yet, at the same time, it follows faithfully the idea of revelation and does not result in such risky and radical break with the revelatory tradition as in the case of the religion of the sublime. If anything (and Lévinas seemed quite aware of this analogy), it resembles closely the Kantian dynamical sublime, which disrupts the order of representation and puts mind "out of joint" only in order to reassert it on the ultimate transcendental level and, after the "displeasure" of disorientation, give it an even firmer sense of ethical direction. The messianic Good emerges here as a plausible *tertium*, transcending the dualism of premodern, ratio-oriented, neo-orthodox and postmodern, irrationalist, anti-orthodox theology – and it is a pity Crockett doesn't regard it even for a second as a promising strategy.

¹⁵ This phrase emerges in his attack on Nietzsche whom Chesterton reproaches for "not having the courage to say 'more good than good and evil', or, 'more evil than good and evil'"; G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Dover Publications: Mineola, New York 2004, p. 97. I only wonder if Crockett, who dismisses the first option, would have the courage to go quite openly for the second...

¹⁶ A good example here is offered again by Phillip Blond, who truly dislikes Lévinas and in his contribution to the volume *Post-Secular Philosophy* accuses him of Manichean tendencies.

This omission appears all the more striking for the fact that the very term Crockett uses to explain the interest of a contemporary theologian in psychoanalysis – *psychotheology* – was coined by Eric Santner, who, in his *Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, makes a very clear connection between Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and Rosenzweig’s messianic ethics, by claiming that they both result in a structurally similar “life-oriented practice”.¹⁷ Understood in Santner’s way, psychotheology shows both: the redemptive dimension of Freudian psychoanalysis and, symmetrically, the analytical dimension of a detailed and meticulous ethics of everyday *halacha*, which in every “neighbor”, every “other,” sees the image of the great Other of God. Psychoanalysis could thus be exploited theologically under the auspices of Santner, Rosenzweig and Lévinas – and this choice would probably bring more fruitful results than the choice assumed almost automatically by Crockett in his absolute and unquestionable privilege given to Lacan. Why? Because the Lacanian “ethics of psychoanalysis”, which Crockett tries to substitute for the discarded utilitarian ethics, cannot really be twisted into what Santner calls “life-oriented practice”. Quite to the contrary, all it can offer is the very opposite of “the messianic drive”; here, the golden road to the experience of the sublime is Thanatos “pure and simple”. In *A Theology of the Sublime* Crockett states this very clearly: “If thinking broadly considered represents the possibility of life in general, the sublime marks a radical discontinuity or break which could be characterized as death” (TS, 100). In his next book he fully endorses “Antigone’s refusal to submit to the good of human or divine law that allows her to incarnate ‘the pure and simple desire of death as such’” (62), which immediately leads him toward highly controversial conclusion: “The reach for God – he says – is a reach for ultimate death – a nihilism – but as a detour it is productive of life when redirected downward in a parabolic arc that admits repetition” (67). This complicated sentence can be translated into a simpler image of a life hopelessly “stuck” (to use another Santner’s term) in a circulatory, self-canceling motion driving both towards and away from “the ultimate death” in a kind of a broken record effect. Is this what we can honestly call a productive and fruitful life? The whole chapter “Foreclosing God” is devoted to elaboration of this paradoxical idea of death sustaining life, according to which we have to escape and evade God if we want to live. We must “foreclose” (reject, refuse; *verweigern*, *abstiessen*) God-Thing-Real in order to survive, but, at the same time, we cannot leave it behind. This circulatory motion of rejection and admission is precisely what Crockett calls “sublimation” whose ultimate limit is not redemption, which would allow the subject to escape the circle, but a “dis-solution”, in which the contradiction simply expires – death, destitution, “apathy”, *Gelassenheit*. Thus, if we live, we do so only on the “borrowed time”, by finding a respite from God whose only “ethical” commandment given to us is, to paraphrase Lacan: “be faithful to your desire – and die”.

Greek Religiosity

¹⁷ Eric Santner, *Psychotheology of Everyday Life. Reflections on Rosenzweig and Freud*, Chicago University Press: Chicago 2001, p. 13.

It is only natural that theology, as a metareflection on the religion of revelation, should be closer to psychoanalysis conceived and interpreted as “Jewish science” as in Santner’s case. But what happens when theology decides to become a “Greek science” and calls for support of a psychoanalytic thinker, who, while considering himself Catholic, comes dangerously close to the Greek tragic sublime, thus finding himself in the “Hellenistic” lineage of Nietzsche and Heidegger? Lacan’s own theology is a fascinating topic, and it is a pity that Crockett glosses over it in a rather superficial manner, not willing to discern between Judaic, Christian, Gnostic and Greek motives that constitute the strange amalgam of Lacanian religious thought (perhaps, because it is a part of his project to withdraw all trust in the concepts of traditional theology). In Crockett’s account, the center of Lacan’s religiosity is constituted by the notion of the sublime which gives an automatic advantage to Lacan’s “Greek” orientation. It privileges what Nietzsche in his late preface to *The Birth of Tragedy* called “Greek religiosity”, centered around the notion of tragic sublime. I emphasize this “Greek” component, because books like *Interstices of the Sublime* make its reader wonder if it isn’t simply necessary to return once again to the clichéd distinction between Athens and Jerusalem, despite all the deconstructive efforts to bring it down and resolve it in the Joycean-Derridean “Jew-Greek” hybrid. Pace Paul Tillich, whose syncretic spirit constantly hovers over Crockett’s book, one would rather want to raise a protest against this lack of distinctions and assert that not every “depth” is religious – or rather, not every depth is religious in the sense that would cooperate with the basic assumptions of Judeo-Christian theology. It is quite possible that Crockett does not care about this “cooperation” – but if so, then he should say that openly, and not delude the reader with any appearance of continuity.

The thinker who tried to resolve the issue between Athens and Jerusalem in a way that would pass beyond simple opposition (as in the case of Shestov, who coined the phrase), but nonetheless keep the salient difference, was Franz Rosenzweig, whose main insights in this respect could somehow clarify this all too “ecumenical” chaos that looms from Crockett’s book. Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption*, written in a similar time to Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, is based on two distinctions: first, between Greeks and Judeo-Christians, and second, already within the religions of revelation, between Christians and Jews. In the latter juxtaposition, the Jew figures as the guardian of difference, the daimonic negative presence which always says “no” to the Christian attempts to convert, swallow and then sublimate all of the pagan world (for Rosenzweig the paradigmatic Christian gesture is Hegelian *Aufhebung* which proceeds towards the final synthesis, i.e. the taking over the whole totality of being). “The eternal protest of the Jew”, as Rosenzweig calls it¹⁸, is concerned with the purity of revelatory message and contests Christianity’s ease of incorporating within this message everything it encounters on its way to convert the whole world; in other words, it warns the Christian of the danger of becoming – unaware and

¹⁸ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. W. Hallo, University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame & London 1985, p. 413.

imperceptibly to himself - a pagan. Strangely enough, the same intuition about the difficult relationship between the Jews and the Christians was expressed by Freud in *Moses and Monotheism*: "At bottom - says Crockett in the introduction - the hatred of Jews by Christians is diagnosed by Freud as a hatred for Christianity, because these Christians do not want to truly understand what Christianity is essentially about" (5). Crockett seems to agree with Freud (and thus, implicitly, with Rosenzweig) - but doesn't he himself fall under this judgment? Is his pushing towards the religion of the sublime not the clear sign that he does not want "to truly understand what Christianity is essentially about"?

The religion of the sublime leads us to the first distinction made by Rosenzweig: between Greeks and Judeo-Christians. Rosenzweig's thesis here is very subtle: unlike Kierkegaard or Shestov, he does not deny the Greeks a certain form of religiosity and even incorporates it into his philosophy of Judaism, portraying the religion of the sublime as the first stage of religious experience, appropriate for the "creaturely world". The sublime, as experienced by "tragic hero", is the first premonition of the deity perceived as the Creator of this world; it is not yet a God of revelation or redemption, but it is already a God of creation.¹⁹ The tragic hero - Oedipus, Antigone - is an individual who, in his or her *hubris* of individuation, wages war against totality (Lacan would say: disrupts the whole of the symbolic order), and thus becomes a true subject, a separate *Selbst*, but this road of individuation leads nowhere. There is no "path" - not yet - that would allow this agonistic, disruptive selfhood to get out from the imprisoning totality of being; here, at this stage, the God shows himself only as the Creator of the world and manifests himself only indirectly and obliquely as Fate and Death. This God is not yet the God of revelation that would endorse this rebellious attitude in man and lead him out of the bondage of the natural world in the bold act of Exodus, *yetziyat mitzraim*, "the getting out of Egypt". The tragic hero, therefore, must die - must fall under the rule of the all-leveling heavy hand of Ananke, the Fate, which punishes all ontological rebellion, all individual *hubris*, always in the same way: by sending death. In this tragic vision, the sublime indicates a sphere which lies beyond the symbolic order of totality, but can never be reached, for there is no "path" leading to it; it is beyond the order, but nonetheless sustains this order, and whoever tries to cross the limit must be punished with death. The tragic hero, therefore, dies - and dies in silence, speechless in his protestation, not having at his disposal a language that would allow him to utter his *No* in a meaningful way.

This is precisely the vision of the sublime that emerges from Crockett's musings on Lacan, Kristeva, and Žižek: the God of a creaturely world, who creates and then sustains the symbolic order of beings and meanings while remaining in the unreachable, "unlivable" beyond. The God who hides behind the totality of being as an untouchable, unrepresentable semi-presence that does not speak, and communicates with his "heroes" only through silence, disruption of speech, or

¹⁹ See the chapter "The Tragic Hero" concluding Part One "Creation" in *The Star of Redemption*, op. cit., pp. 76-82.

schizophrenic breakdown of language; the songs and auguries of death. The God who demands nothing but a submission to the mysterious cyclical movement of creation and destruction, constitution and disruption, being and non-being, life and death. And this submission is, in fact, nothing else but the very act of sublimation that constitutes the main theme of Crockett's book: the self-contradictory, self-disruptive process of the production of meanings which simultaneously drives toward *and* away from the unnameable Thing, the "black sun" of this darkly sublime universe. "The question of schizophrenia – Crockett says in the chapter characteristically entitled "We are All Mad" – is the question of the black sun, or the destabilizing effects exerted on language by the Real, which creates a schizophrenic condition and necessitates the articulation of a schizophrenic language in response" (46).

For Rosenzweig, the culmination of the Greek tragic paradigm occurs in Nietzsche. And indeed, Nietzsche's Dionisian world delivers a perfect example of the nihilistic modern sublime that so strongly captivates Crockett's imagination: "This, my Dionisian world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying, this mystery world of the twofold voluptuous delight, my 'beyond good and evil', without goal, unless the joy of the circle is itself a goal; without will, unless a ring feels good will towards itself – do you want a name for this world? A solution for all its riddles? A light for you, too, you best-concealed, strongest, most intrepid, most midnightly men? – *This world is the will to power – and nothing besides!* And you yourselves are also will to power – and nothing besides!"²⁰ There is, therefore, some truth in Phillip Blond's attack on the sublime as the modern surrogate of God which concentrates solely on one divine attribute: *power*. On the other hand, even while admitting some right of this critique, one does not have to follow Blond's positive conclusion and restore God as a secure foundation of our wonderfully rational universe. We can still opt for the third option I tried to outline above (albeit very sketchily), namely the *messianic option*, which avoids "pagan" fascination with bare power and yet preserves the disruptive effect of divine sublimity, aiming precisely at *breaking the ontological cycle*.

The revelatory force of Exodus disrupts the circular movement of being, of the Nietzschean "will that wills itself only". But this is not the kind of disruption that Crockett has in mind. His set of imagination is precisely reverse: for him, this messianic disruption is nothing but a defensive escape from the ultimate reality of the primordial abyss which nonetheless exerts its rule in disrupting our efforts to "get out". Putting things bluntly: as a believer, he is on the side of Abyss, and against God. This is precisely why, in the chapter devoted to Schelling's draft of the *Ages of the World*, Crockett criticizes Žižek's interpretation for its strong emphasis on conflict within the primordial abyss and the need of *decision* that would break out of its self-contradictory circle. Following Tillich's reading of Schelling, as well as adding a little Deleuze to his critical apparatus, Crockett "defends" the abyss, trying to reclaim its creative, spontaneous qualities. In his

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale, Vintage: New York 1968, paragraph 1067.

reading, the abyss “sublimates itself” spontaneously due to the creative movement of Deleuzian repetition, and this is one, monistic operation that does not need any cut, breach, or trenchant “decision” to proceed. Here, as in many other passages of Crockett’s book, there emerges a fundamental theoretical difficulty: it seems that Crockett cannot make up his mind whether he wants to follow Deleuzian monism or stay faithful to the strict dualism of Lacan. But, even putting aside this unresolved tension, his reading of Schelling still misses the main issue that lies at stake in Žižek’s interpretation: how to transform the cyclical “abyssal” creativity, which is bound within itself, into a new kind of dynamic that would be able to engender history, and most of all *Heilsgeschichte*. Or, by coming back to Kant: how to transcend the impasse of the mathematical sublime and enter the sphere of dynamical experience which is both proleptic and hopeful. “The true Beginning – says Žižek in *The Indivisible Remainder* – is the passage from the ‘closed’ rotary motion to ‘open’ progress, from drive to desire – or, in Lacanian terms, from the Real to the Symbolic”.²¹ It seems that in his simplifying identification of morality with utilitarian ethics, Crockett once again forgets the wager lying behind the “decision”, which in Žižek’s reading introduces a rapture into the primary substance of Godhead; he neglects the most crucial, “exodic” quality of Revelation (here identical with “decision), i.e. the fundamental Good of leaving the cycle. Instead, he paints a Deleuzian picture of the primordial divine will where “the rotary motion of the drives persists not in its ideal form, which prevents beginning or time, but in a muted repetition” (122). But this movement leads *nowhere*; it only produces new ripples on its oceanic surface. The kaleidoscope still turns, creating nothing but superficially new images within the essential return of the same.

The interest contemporary theology pays to the notion of the sublime is a fascinating syndrome, and Crockett’s book, despite all its theoretical shortcomings, is a perfect example of this new trend. Having expressed my doubts, I nonetheless urge to readers to reach for Crockett’s work and have a go with its ideas, which open new territories, so far uncharted theologically. I cannot say that Crockett’s book gives us a “chart” that could lead – safely or not – through the newly opened dimension of the sublime, for it is still too much caught in the syndrome itself: it is teeming with anxiety, insecurity, confusion and implicit doubts that leave a vast margin of indecision. Already in his earlier work on the sublime, Crockett quite honestly admits that “a theology of the sublime, which is unable to be harnessed by reason toward moral ends, also resonates with a felt sense of disorientation, dizzying change, and the perceived breakdown of both social structures and patterns of thought” (TS, 112). But this disorientation comes from the uneasy sense of contradiction that seems to trouble Crockett constantly, though at the same time tacitly: the contradiction between the “fiery” condition of “ultimate concerns”, which naturally call for hope and action, and the “stony vision” of a mind that contemplates the abyss

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder. An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, Verso: London 1996, p. 13.

and slowly “turns into stone” itself. That this paralyzing petrification is the only true response to the sublime is fully confirmed by Nietzsche, who in *The Dawn of the Day* says: “How we turn to stone. By slowly, very slowly growing hard like precious stones, and at last lie still; a joy to all eternity”.²² This “stony joy”, if it is possible at all, belongs to a completely different emotional register, which is very far from any concern; in fact, it consists in *gelassen* letting go of all concerns, whether small or ultimate.

I would thus conclude by saying that Crockett appears not reconciled *affectively* with the logical consequences of his religion of the sublime, and this unnamed unease causes him a great deal of anxiety. It often seems that he would like to announce at the same time: “God is dead” and “Long live God!”, as if he couldn’t really let go of “positive revelation” and become truly “unharnessed and freed from dogma”. Or, in other words, as if he still desperately tried to find God in the divine debris that floats in the “shapeless” experience of the modern, and especially postmodern, sublime. I am not sure if he actually found him there, or *what* he found at all. But even if he found something, I am afraid it could not - would not - answer his “ultimate concerns”: his “yearning for truth, justice, simplicity, and the good in an unevenly globalized world marked by confusion, conflict, and brutality” (186). For these concerns and yearnings still seem to be “harnessed” by a very different dogma.

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²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Dawn of the Day, Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. 9, trans. J. M. Kennedy, Macmillan & Co: New York 1911, aphorism nr 541.