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THE SUBLIME AND THE MESSIANIC:
A REPLY TO AGATA BIELEK-ROBSON

First of all, I want to thank Agata Bielek-Robson for this engaging and critical review of *Interstices of the Sublime*. In response, and I appreciate the editors of the JCRT for inviting me to respond to this review, I would like to address briefly the significance of the notion of the unconscious, the modern as opposed to the postmodern sublime, and finally the messianic. We know at least since Lacan, but it is already clear in Freud, that the unconscious is not a thing, but rather a dynamic process, the active resistance to consciousness of repressed or disturbing ideas. Affects, however, are not repressed, which is why they emerge and attach themselves to all kinds of seemingly obscure and bizarre ideational contents. What I take from a reading of psychoanalytic theory is that religious belief cannot be situated solely at the level of straightforward conscious or intentional belief, that it is not simply a question of adherence or allegiance to a religion, whether Judaism or Christianity or Buddhism. Part of my difficulty with Radical Orthodoxy is that it seems very modern to insist upon the importance of conscious belief, of adherence to an (Anglo-Catholic) orthodoxy, although Radical Orthodoxy also provides tools to complicate such straightforward belief. At the same time, it seems to finally want to recoup a belief in transcendence and harmony, to insist upon a positivity that is untainted with negativity, and here is where I see Bielek-Robson's review really forcing a choice, an either/or, the absence of which makes my work on the sublime incoherent.

I would suggest that Bielek-Robson is altogether too modern in her insistence upon the fundamental incompatibility of some of these alternatives: Judeo-Christian vs. Greek, love vs. terror, faith vs. nihilism, passion vs. apathy, and the mathematical sublime vs. the dynamical sublime. By reading the negativity of the sublime in solely negative terms, Bielek-Robson ignores both the insights of Derridean deconstruction, which calls into question such binary oppositions precisely by emphasizing the term which is seen as inferior, in order to deconstruct the logic of the opposition itself, as well as Žižek's insistence, following Hegel and Lacan, upon "Tarrying with the Negative." Such tarrying is not a simple affirmation of a negation, but a complex operation that may or may not possess therapeutic value, but again, the emphasis of psychoanalytic thought seems to be that attending to thoughts, dispositions and desires that are considered negative, disturbing, immoral and counter-intuitive has genuine significance and value. Although the negativity of the (Kantian, mathematical) sublime is my point of access to the sublime more generally (and Bielek-Robson does an excellent job of seeing the continuity between *A Theology of the Sublime*

and *Interstices of the Sublime*), in many respects my project works toward a post-modern sublime rather than staying within the framework of the modern sublime.

That is, the modern sublime essentially represents the aesthetic formlessness that opposes the form of traditional religious belief and practice, but the key to the postmodern sublime is that it indicates a proliferation of forms rather than a simple absence of them. The classical Kantian sublime emphasizes the moral elevation of the dynamic sublime, as Bielek-Robson notes. At the same time, the modernist aesthetic sublime grapples with the formlessness that the mathematical sublime implies as the limit of form. The post-modern sublime in a moral context involves the sublation of modern secularism, which is the approach of Radical Orthodoxy, whereas *A Theology of the Sublime* engages the aesthetic dimension of the post-modern sublime, which involves a multiplicity of forms. At the level of belief, the post-modern sublime involves a profusion of forms of belief, many of which are strictly speaking unconscious. The problem of psychoanalytic theory is that there are too many interpretations, and this fecundity of the unconscious helps us approach a consideration of the Real, although I recognize that my language is not entirely consistent in this matter. The excessiveness of belief, including its manifestation as unbelief as well as the necessary indeterminacy of belief, renders impossible the project of orthodoxy, understood as the precise determination of right belief.¹

Radical Orthodoxy appropriates postmodern theory in order to deconstruct and evacuate modern secular reason. At the same time, what can be called “post-secular” thinking also calls into question the basic opposition between European modernity and pre-modern Christian ways of thinking by suggesting that Western Europe is more profoundly entangled with traditional Christianity than enlightened secularists or religious critics have imagined.² For me, post-modern does not mean anti-modern, and post-secular does not simply mean anti-secular or anti-Enlightenment, but we do have to question the grounds of all of these distinctions, including their epistemological, cultural and political grounds. Bielek-Robson follows Radical Orthodoxy too closely in her reading of my understanding of the sublime, because she substantializes the sublime into an object or a thing that is then conceptualized as an anti-God, associated solely with blind power and without any wisdom or goodness. The sublime as thing is what induces stoniness, and the sublime is here figured by Bielek-Robson as a modern Medusa – gazing fixedly at the sublime turns one to stone, to a hard cold apathy. I think this is a distortion of my reading, and I emphasize, although more

¹ See Jeffrey W. Robbins, “The Gift of Unbelief: An Existentialist Challenge in a Post-Metaphysical World,” *Angelaki* 12:1, April 2007, pp.11-17. Robbins does not explicitly consider psychoanalysis, but his reading of a short story by Unamuno indicates that in the early 20th century belief took the form of unbelief, whereas today, in a post-metaphysical context, the distinction between belief and unbelief is undecidable, and the challenge is to view this situation as a gift.

² See, for example, Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p.142: “Christianity is inseparable from the West.”

explicitly in *A Theology of the Sublime*, that the sublime is a process and not a thing, an activity that concerns thinking or coming to representation, and this is a dynamic rather than a static process in Kant, Freud and Lacan. In terms of Husserl, I see my understanding of the sublime as more noetic than noematic, whereas I think that both Milbank and Bielek-Robson follow Jean-Luc Marion in considering the sublime as primarily noematic. The sublime is not an entity any more than God is, although it is extremely difficult to use the name of God and not have it indicate a person or being, and much of our discourse at least intends a noematic concept. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida says that

We should stop thinking of God as someone, over there, way up there, transcendent.... Then we might say: God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior.³

This is a “structure of conscience,” but if it is secret, then it may also be a secret from myself, which makes it uncanny, in a Freudian sense.

On the other hand, if the sublime is the anti-divine, as Bielek-Robson suggests, then a restoration must recover the authentic God. Here is the crux of the matter, the alternative between Radical Orthodoxy and my version of radical theology, which then gets trapped in the same logic of either/or—either good God or nihilistic sublime. Bielek-Robson provides the potential solution, and this is the key critical insight of her review because she identifies the most significant and telling absence of my book, which is its lack of consideration of the messianic, which pervades so many postmodern theological discussions. Here is the rub: why is Lacan the ‘hero’ and not Levinas, when it is Levinas who helps us think the good beyond being, whose Other is an-other person with whom I can be in relationship rather than an impersonal Other that sets the conditions of possibility for my interactions? After all, the redemptive promise of messianic goodness, does in fact counter the negativity attached to sublime being, including the notion of God as a Thing, a malevolent supreme being.

Right? Why refuse a forced choice between the ethical/dynamic and the epistemological/mathematical sublime? As someone who has studied theology and psychoanalytic theory, I struggle with the conflation of theology with idealistic wish-fulfillment, and I have wrestled with the fact that often self-awareness comes from resisting an all-too-easy affirmation, even as I also recognize and affirm that ultimately we are affirming beings, our primary and instinctual response is to say ‘yes’ to the world’s ‘yes’. Yes, it is good, yes, mommy and daddy love me and God loves me. Yes, the USA and democracy are good and yes, love and hope and faith are sustained and rewarded now and forever, amen. I want to affirm that too, but I also know better, which means that I know differently, and it seems faithless to disavow that knowledge, which is also an ethical form of knowledge. I do not think that we are done with

³ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.108.

metaphysics or ontology or the Enlightenment or science or modernity or religion or faith or Christianity or the nation-state, but that does not mean I have to buy them in any of their forms. I do not think that we have mastered and dismissed the “masters” of suspicion, including Freud. Does that mean I can sustain a general formlessness? No, but following Derrida, I can think the form of religion without religion, or the form of metaphysics without any particular metaphysics, etc. Does this make me better, more self-aware? I don’t really know, and I am inclined to doubt it, at least as an outcome, but for me that is the only way that I know how to be ethical.

We possess this power of abstraction, even if abstraction does not ultimately work, because it re-inscribes a particular practice of thinking and acting. Or maybe this is what it means to work. This is the same issue as that of sublimation, the fact that I can redirect basic drives and wishes that might seem more primal or biological into more cultural or more spiritual activities. My insistence upon the sublime, however, means that this transformation or this translation is not a simple elevation, and it is not without remainder. What I resist is not the dynamical sublime as such, but the idea that it elevates me above nature, and introduces a higher plane, so that I can then claim that morality occurs on a higher plane and immorality (or amorality) occurs on a lower, more base, one. This is the problem of reductionism that I address in the first chapter. Returning to the messianic, I am not opposed to the messianic, and I recognize and affirm a quasi-messianic, formal aspect of all of our thinking and acting, which is how I read Benjamin and Derrida. Yes, there is a weak messianic force, which invokes the promise of redemption, and which hopes for justice to come. I have three major concerns with a stereotypical reading of messianism, however. My epistemological concern is that sometimes messianicity is conceived as beyond being, as perfectly formless and opposed to forms. Even if messianic form is structurally indeterminate, this does not mean that it simply lacks form. According to a certain reading of Levinas, the good is thought as formless, or formlessness itself, that is, without being, and this lack of being is viewed as a freedom from form. The trace of the formless good then precedes and takes precedence over form, inaugurating and instantiating ethics. On the other hand, I understand the “trace” as an intrinsic part of form itself, as part of the plasticity of its being, such that the sublime is not simply or absolutely formless(ness). Here I am influenced by the work of Catherine Malabou, especially her book *La plasticité au soir de l’écriture*.⁴

My second concern is moral, the extent to which this weak messianic force too quickly and too easily becomes a strong, triumphalist messianic power, by identifying and conflating a particular version of the good, my good, with this desire for justice to come. My final, practical concern is that such a messianic approach may induce a critical or an actual passivity, if we become passive in our expectation and in our hope. This is my reservation concerning Heideggerian

⁴ See Catherine Malabou, *La plasticité au soir de l’écriture: Dialectique, destruction, deconstruction* (Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2005), translation forthcoming from Columbia University Press. For her critique of Levinas, see pp.87-89.

Gelassenheit, if the awaiting of the messiah or the messianic is equated with the despair of “only a god can save us.”

So according to a superficial reading, a theology of Radical Orthodoxy offers a restoration of a traditional form of Christianity in new wineskins, while my theology of the sublime appears to offer only a brute nothing upon which to gaze until we turn to stone, a theology fit for a postmodern capitalist world of consumption that turns us into zombies as we stare at screens. Finally, a messianic theology of the event promises a future, if we can rise to meet it. Again, while this picture has rhetorical plausibility, I would resist it as too simple and simplistic, and I would point to some of the political implications of Žižek and Badiou, both philosophers strongly influenced by Lacan. Žižek and Badiou follow Lacan in insisting that the significance of psychoanalysis is not merely at the level of the individual’s narcissistic or neurotic desire, but rather the unconscious is socially symbolic. Žižek helps us follow the incredibly subtle detours of ideology at the cultural, psychological, political and individual levels, and he warns us that “ultimately, the worst thing that can happen is for us to get what we ‘officially’ desire.”⁵ Žižek is a Christian atheist and Badiou is a militant atheist. Both affirm the structural form of subjectivity that Pauline Christianity expresses, but they do not promise any happy endings. Badiou’s mathematical ontology can be seen as an elaboration of the Kantian mathematical sublime, radically purged of any dynamic subjectivity. What is mathematically sublime in *Being and Event* is the irreducible multiplicity of being expressed in set theoretical terms, and specifically the excess of inclusion in a set over belonging to a set. This excess of what can be included as a sub-set in relation to what properly belongs to a set becomes the tear in the fabric of being that allows for an event, which is necessarily sublime, even if Badiou does not use this term. For Badiou, the event constitutes a subject, who does not exist prior to its occurrence. The subject emerges in her radical fidelity to an event.

Even if we invoke or idealize an event, that does not mean that its coming is necessarily good. Most contemporary readers shrink back from the imagery of the Book of Revelation. When faced with the seven seals of the scroll of the One who sits on the throne, who among us can shout “Come!” without hesitation? We stand on the threshold of the event, augured by crises related to financial implosion, food and energy scarcity, global warming and the limits of global capitalism, and I believe that its provenance is more secular than religious, at least in literal terms. If John D. Caputo is right, and God is the name that shelters an event, then I suggest that there is always a sublime penumbral shadow of any event, which is destructive as well as creative, to the extent that it cannot be designated as good, purely and simply. Psychoanalytic theory helps us reflect upon an event, its conditions, stakes and effects, and how it both resists and conforms to political and ideological processes. Ultimately the postmodern

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), p.43. I don’t think Žižek’s “thrilling romance” with Chesterton and orthodoxy amounts to much more than a flirtation, as he quickly reaches “the limit of Chesterton” and of “really existing Christianity” before the end of Chapter 2 (p.52-53).

sublime must be productive and political, or else Bielek-Robson is correct in her critique, even if as a description of our contemporary world there are elements that transfix us with horror. My challenge now is to write a radical political theology that is responsive to these insights of the sublime.

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