

such, it might even be read and judged in terms like those set by James Olney for his *Metaphors of Self*: by how much it displays "what forms have proved possible to humanity" and considers "'How shall I live?' If autobiography can advance our understanding of that question, and I think it can, then it is a very valuable literature indeed" (xi).

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In recent years the sublime as a patriarchal discourse has come in for considerable attention and revision in such studies as Thomas Weiskel's *The Romantic Sublime* (1976), Steven Knapp's *Personification and the Sublime* (1985), Patricia Yaeger's "Towards a Female Sublime" (in Linda Kauffman's *Gender and Theory* [1989]), Peter de Bolla's *The Discourse of the Sublime* (1989) and Rob Wilson's *American Sublime* (1991). While Barbara Claire Freeman's and Vijay Mishra's more recent books on aspects of the literary sublime acknowledge such precursors, the two books could hardly be more different from each other. Mishra focuses on specific historical texts recognized as "Gothic," producing new insights into familiar texts and suggesting ways of reading the Gothic in relation to postmodernism. Freeman focuses on the sublime in more general terms, redefining it as a way of rereading mostly twentieth-century fiction by women. While the two writers share some inevitable common ground, treating Burke and Kant as important eighteenth-century theorists of the sublime, the only work of fiction they both treat is Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Neverthe-

less, both books contribute substantially to our understanding of the literary sublime.

The Gothic Sublime is a lively and wide-ranging study emphasizing the disruption of continuities in the Gothic, its opposition to the possibilities for transcendence in the Romantic sublime, and its annihilation of subjective identity and other ordered constructs. The approach is both historical and theoretical, including an introductory survey of previous studies of the "Gothic" and the "sublime" and a chapter on "Theorizing the (Gothic) Sublime," before going on to treat major texts in and on the fringes of the Gothic canon—especially *Otranto*, *The Mysterious Mother*, *Mathilda*, *Caleb Williams*, *The Last Man*, *Frankenstein*, and, in the last chapter, *The Italian*, *The Monk*, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, and *Pierre*.

Focusing on mostly British texts from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Mishra relates the Gothic sublime to the sublime of late capitalism in which, in Wilson's account of Fredric Jameson, the subject is "blissed out before feats of postmodern commodification" (Mishra 26). Mishra shows how, unlike the Romantic sublime which celebrates the triumphant transcendence of the subject, the Gothic sublime, purely negative, subsumes the subject. Noting how it disrupts historical continuity, he argues that the Gothic sublime resonates with the postmodern, giving us some clues to understanding not only the postmodern sublime in literature but, more generally, our own age and its culture.

As Mishra observes in his Preface, this book demonstrates the "combination of strong textualism with theory" (x). On the textual side, the readings are suggestive, particularly in their intertextual resonances, informed as they are by historical scholarship as well as theory. Occasionally, the very energy of the writing generates sublime mistakes: Wordsworth never mentions the ruins of Tintern Abbey as "a power that drags the mind back from the brink of collapse" (94); Mary Shelley's unnamed infant daughter did not "die in her arms" (158). Sometimes the argument leaps to its conclusion too quickly: "the feverish nature of Mary Shelley's handwriting" (105) is claimed but, in spite of the illustrations, not explained to my satisfaction. The vacillation between textual and theoretical discussion is often quite abrupt and occasionally confusing, as in those few places where a subheading in the middle of a page is the only indication of a shift in subject or strategy.

Apart from such local flaws, however, this is a strong book on its own terms. It engages eloquently and energetically with theory from Burke and Kant to Freud, Lyotard, Jameson, and Lacan. Its individual readings are strong, its overall argument clearly stated and convincingly argued. My only substantial reservation is that *The Gothic Sublime* is not always as successful at reading the Gothic sublime in the context of its own period as at treating history from a postmodern perspective. Texts

discussed are canonical Gothic works; generalizations about Romanticism are quite familiar ones; the book says little about the role of poetry in constituting the Gothic sublime. Some generalizations need qualifying: in spite of the impression readers might be left with, *Caleb Williams* is only one of many novels of the 1790s that offer "a powerful critique of existing social values." The definition of "Gothic" remains elusive, something "historically reconstituted" in a number of different ways, but grasped only in the reading of particular texts or, fitfully, in the kind of subtle theoretical discussion offered by *The Gothic Sublime* at its best.

Beginning with a different focus, Barbara Claire Freeman provides a compelling theory of the feminine sublime—a term which would have made little sense to eighteenth-century theorists or to writers of early Gothic fictions. Her book is much more economically written than Mishra's, her readings tightly constructed, with excellent and sometimes extensive notes developing insights in the text, which treats primarily Burke, Kant, *The Awakening*, *The House of Mirth*, *Frankenstein*, *Good Morning*, *Midnight*, and *Beloved*.

Reading the sublime as "a theoretical discourse . . . about the subject's diverse responses to that which occurs at the very limits of symbolization," Freeman skillfully demonstrates some of Burke's inconsistencies in the *Philosophical Enquiry*. Using the female body as his ideal of the beautiful, for example, Burke describes it in terms of uncertainty that are better suited to his definition of the sublime. Breaking beyond that impasse or paradox, Freeman treats the sublime as that which, by eluding the gaze (and hence the commodity-category of the "beautiful"), changes the role of spectator to that of speculator and serves to empower the female subject.

Freeman's treatment of Burke might have benefited from Mishra's insight into the Gothic sublime, perhaps the most influential version of the Burkean sublime, as a negative sublime. She contrasts the positive value Burke ascribes to the sublime in the *Enquiry* with the terror evoked by the political sublime in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, without seeming to recognize that Burke's positive and negative versions of the sublime are points on a continuum, generated by *degrees* of fear. Nevertheless, her readings of Burke and even more of Kant are skillful, suggestive, and (as always in this book) elegantly written. In her discussion of *Frankenstein*, Freeman asks, "First, what is the logic that links the theorist's [specifically Kant's] desire for truth to a search for the sublime and the construction of monstrosity? And second, might the monstrosity of a being that, like the maternal body, is a collectivity of parts neither wholly separate nor totally merged, also be a figure for theory?" (87). Her reading of *Frankenstein* depends on her reading of Kant's subordination of imagination to reason as a gendered relation: enacting and parodying the Kantian sublime, Freeman argues, Mary Shelley demonstrates both the misogyny of the Kantian

sublime and its unacknowledged relation to a monstrosity Kant's visual emphasis denies. *Frankenstein* is, then, a critique of the sublime, inverting its usual categories of meaning.

Mishra and Freeman's discussions of *Frankenstein* mark some of the main differences between them. Mishra bases his reading largely on contexts which frame and replicate it—Shelley's journals, the 1818 preface, the 1831 introduction, reviews, dramatic and film versions of the novel—and on biography. Admitting that feminist critics have "dislodged the primacy of the masculine sublime" (206), he reads the monster as "[t]he absolutely great, the Gothic colossus" (223), silencing the beautiful and becoming "literature's grand vision of the sublime"—a reading without Freeman's broadening and shifting of the very meaning of the sublime. Freeman, however, offers such an abbreviated reading of *Frankenstein* that it cannot stand alone. Her context is primarily the theoretical argument of her own book, and Shelley's novel is less important than the argument it supports about the relation between the monstrous and the sublime.

Mishra's book is a historical study informed by theory. Freeman's is a work of feminist theory informed by politics and history. In a moving final chapter on *Beloved*, Freeman compares the Kantian sublime—pushed to the margins but threatening the boundaries that would contain it—with African-American culture, with the traumatic event that cannot and yet must be remembered ("an event whose magnitude impedes its very symbolization" [128]), and with the role of *Beloved* in Morrison's novel: "Beloved enacts the sublime" (136). Finally, her book serves to transform not only our understanding of the sublime as a historically constituted category, but our understanding of its meaning and how it shapes our consciousness and politics, as mastery and appropriation give way to "radical uncertainty" (12).

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Gisela Brinker-Gabler, ed. *Encountering the Other(s): Studies in Literature, History, and Culture*. Albany: SUNYP, 1995. Pp. viii, 378. \$23.95.

The 1991 SUNY Binghamton Symposium and its papers, which Gisela Brinker-Gabler gathers in *Encountering the Other(s)*, are part of an ongoing critical project that may constitute the test of the "postmodern condition": the question—and the questioning—of the other. Fully bringing out the complexity of this project, the anthology explores in various ways and contexts the cultural other at the same time that it interrogates the Western modes of raising the question of the other, of dealing with otherness in general. In this view, hermeneutic reconstruction and critical deconstruction are inseparable in *Encountering the Other(s)*. Broadly speaking, the cultural-historical debates it hosts partake in the larger poststructuralist critique of metaphysics. As