

English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832
Professor Pramod K Nayar
Department of English
University of Hyderabad
Romantic Poetry 3: Aesthetics Blake

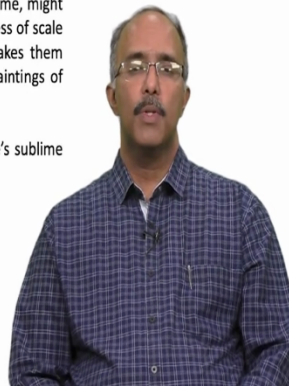
Hello everybody, we continue our exploration of aesthetics, specifically of the Sublime and the Picturesque, the picturesque in the poetry of the English Romantic 1798 to 1832. In the last session we looked at William Wordsworth and his employment of these two aesthetics. Today we turn to William Blake.

(Refer Slide Time 0:33)

The distinguished Romanticism scholar, David Simpson notes that

The aesthetics of the sublime, also very popular at the time, might be affirmatively related to Blake's visionary images, but the smallness of scale and intimacy of format in, for example, the prophetic books makes them rather remote from the manner typified conventionally by the paintings of Turner and Martin.

It is in the paintings, etchings and the visionary poems that Blake's sublime makes its presence felt.



The distinguished romanticism scholar, David Simpson has argued that the aesthetics of the sublime are related primarily to William Blake's visionary images. But the smallness of scale and intimacy of the format in, for example the prophetic books makes them a little difficult for us to see how it operates. And Simpson argues that you can see the sublime primarily in painting such as Turner's and John Maron's. However the visionary poems are clearly rooted in anaesthetics of the sublime.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:05)



Blake, illustration to Dante's Hell



Blake we know was an illustrator and his illustration of say for instance coming up on your screen now a slide of Dante's work, this is Blake illuminating and illustrating Dante's hell. you can see marks of the sublime here.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:23)

On the difference between Blake's sublime from that of Burke, Vincent de Luca writes: instead of obscurity, indefinite vastness, and threatening power, there must be determinacy, concentration, and intellectual play.

Slide:



What's the difference from Blake's sublime of Blake's sublime from that of Edmund Burke? As you know Burke wrote a detailed essay on the origins and the range and the theory of the sublime and the beautiful. Vincent De Luca has written that instead of obscurity, indefinite

vastness, and threatening power, there must be determinacy, concentration, intellectual play in Blakes sublime.

Let us begin with a small instance, an excerpt from Blakes prophetic book, Jerusalem. Please pull this up on the next slide so you can see this.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:59)

Terrified at the sublime Wonder, Los stood before
his Furnaces. And they stood around, terrified with
admiration at Erins Spaces For the Spaces reachd
from the starry heighth, to the starry depth.

Blake, *Jerusalem*



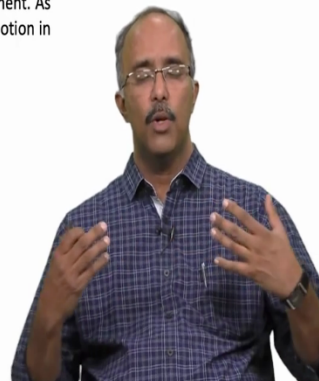
Terrified at the sublime wonder, Los stood before his furnaces. And they stood around, terrified with admiration at Erins Spaces For the Spaces reached from the starry height, to the starry depth. From the starry height to the starry depth.

(Refer Slide Time: 2:17)

Here, Blake's sublime is close to Burke's, speaking of external sights that trigger a response of awe, terror and astonishment. As de Luca emphasizes, for Blake, astonishment is the key emotion in this text.

Many figures in Blake speaking in thundering tones.

Slide:



Blake's sublime here is very close to Burke's and speaks of external sights that trigger a response of terror and astonishment. As you know it is the sight of incomprehensible length, breadth and dimensions that produce the sublime. As de Luca emphasises astonishment is the key emotion in this text and that's central to how the sublime operates in William Blake. But there are other forms of the sublime, Blake's characters, many of them speak in very thundering tones. Here is a slide which illustrates this.

(Refer Slide Time: 2:53)

Loud thundering, with broad flashes of flaming lightning & pillars
Of fire, speaking the Words of Eternity in Human Forms.

And

Conversed together in Visionary forms dramatic which bright
Redounded from their Tongues in thunderous majesty.



Loud thundering, with broad flashes of flaming lightning and pillars of fire, speaking, not what he is saying, speaking the words of eternity in human forms. And are except conversed together in visionary forms dramatic which bright Redounded from their tongues in thunderous majesty.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:16)

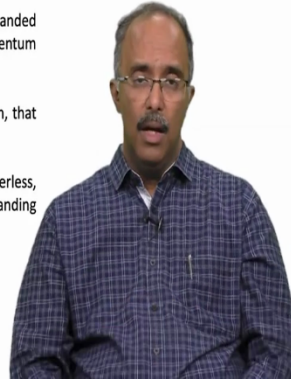
For Blake, the astonishment and terror of the sublime cannot be simply immobilizing. Rather, he also seeks a sublimity where there is replenishment, redemption, revelation and what de Luca identifies as the 'exalted delight'.

That is, for Blake, the sublime can be the magnitude of the expanded imagination, greater comprehension and moving forward with momentum rather than being held back in terror.

It is not the Burkean obscurity of the sublime, but clarity, and vision, that Blake's sublime consists of.

Then there is the catalog-style expansion of items that appear borderless, like the sublime itself, in other Blake texts. Indicating an expanding universe of things, Blake writes:

Slide:



It's not enough to say there is a sublimity of the image, of the visual, as you can see from what I have just accepted and put up on your slide. The sublimity is also oral as in what you are hearing. So, there are two companies, obviously this sublime is connected to the senses. So, you need to keep in mind that the sublime is not only a question of a specific kind of image are specific kind of vision of the world around, it's also at you here but as we have seen in the case of Wordsworth and Shelley a mountain can induce sublime imagination.

For Blake this astonishment and terror of the sublime cannot be simply immobilising. He seeks a sublimity where there is replenishments, redemption, revelation and what de Luca identifies as the 'exalted delight'. That means for Blake the sublime can be the magnitude of the expanded imagination, greater comprehension and moving forward with momentum rather than being held back in terror.

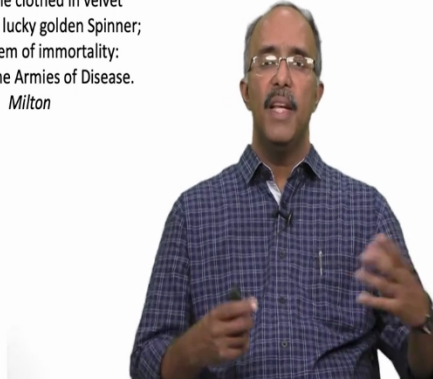
If you recall what we have discussed, the sublime is what makes you scared, you are awe struck by what you are seeing. In many cases the awe, the fear immobilises you, keeps you stationary. But for Blake to be in one place stationary is death. The first dynamism, movement, action. So, for Blake the sublime is not just staying in one place, moving forward with momentum rather than being held back in terror.

It's not the Burkean obscurity of the sublime, but clarity, and vision, that Blake's sublime consist of. Then there is a catalogue style expansion of items that appear borderless, like the sublime

itself huge, vast, numberless. Coming up on your slide is an excerpt for this kind of instance, this is from William Blake's Milton. Take a look at the slide and what it's saying.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:10)

Timbrels & violins sport round the Wine presses; the little Seed;
The sportive Root, the Earth-worm, the gold Beetle; the wise Emmet;
Dance round the Wine-presses of Luvah: the Centipede is there:
The ground Spider with many eyes: the Mole clothed in velvet
The ambitious Spider in his sullen web; the lucky golden Spinner;
The Earwig armd: the tender Maggot emblem of immortality:
The Flea: Louse: Bug: the Tape-Worm: all the Armies of Disease.
Milton



Timbrels and violins sport round the wine presses; little he seed;
The sportive root, the Earth-worm, the gold beetle; the wise Emmet;
The ground spider with many eyes. And note here this is a catalogue isn't it? But a catalogue which is of very different kinds of animals. You have spiders like things and the Earth-worm and things like that. The flea, the Earwig. In the (05:40) Blake will give us this, coming up on your next slide.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:45)

The barked Oak, the long limbd Beech; the Ches'nut tree; the Pine.
The Pear tree mild, the frowning Walnut, the sharp Crab, & Apple sweet,
The rough bark opens; twittering peep forth little beaks & wings
The Nightingale, the Goldfinch, Robin, Lark, Linnet & Thrush
The Four Zoas



The barked oak, the long limbd beech; the Ches'nut tree; the pine.
The pear tree mild, the frowning walnut, the sharp crab, and Apple sweet,
The rough bark opens; twittering peep forth like little beaks and wings
The Nightingale, the Goldfinch, Robin, Lark, Linnet and Thrush.

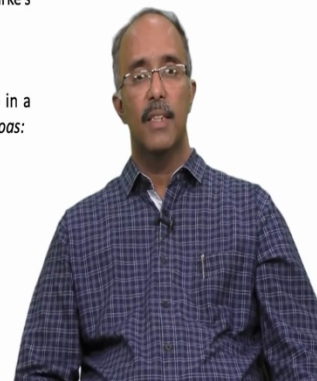
(Refer Slide Time: 6:07)

Fires, floods, thunderstorms, and the wild creatures of the forest also gesture at the sublime.

Once again, the sublime is about vitality, dynamism and energy in Blake, not the frozen-to-the spot astonishment of Burke's sublime.

We can see this energetic (rather than disabling) sublime in a famous description of Orc (chained to a rock) in *The Four Zoas*:

Slide



So fire, floods, thunderstorms, while creatures of forest are also things that signal the sublime.

Once again, the sublime is about vitality, dynamism and energy in Blake, not the frozen-to-the spot of the astonishment of Burke's sublime.

You will recall lots of Burke's image the Alps are on this side and there is a group of people who have come here and looking at the mountain, they are all turning away this way, that they are inclining the other way. They are frozen to the spot because the scope of nature is so large. So, it's not a frozen to the spot astonishment, its dynamic, it's vital.

We can see this energetic sublime in a famous description of Orc (chained to a rock) in The Four Zoas:

Coming up on your slide now...

(Refer Slide Time: 6:55)

His nostrils breathe a fiery flame, his locks are like the forests
Of wild beasts there the lion glares the tyger & wolf howl there
And there the Eagle hides her young in cliffs & precipices
His bosom is like stary heaven expanded all the stars
Sing round, there waves the harvest & the vintage rejoices, the Springs
Flow into rivers of delight.



His nostrils breathed a fiery flame, his locks are like the forests
Of wild beasts there the lion glares the tyger & wolf howl here.

Notice again a listing going on, you know so many different kinds of things. But you can see very clearly there is dynamism, there is energy, there is rage. Blake, again now one more excerpt from the proverbs of hell coming up on your screen next.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:19)

The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the
raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword,
are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man.

Blake, *The Proverbs of Hell*



The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves,
the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword,
are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man.

Look at what he's saying here, 'too great for the eye of man' specially the point I made, the sublime is something which is incomprehensible because when you look at the mountain like that, when you have to behold the sea stretching away or the desert sands, you can't see the limits because your sight line stops at a point. The sublime is something that exceeds that.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:52)

In this Blake clearly links sublimity to the human inability to comprehend.

He would embody this in his most famous poem, 'The Tyger':

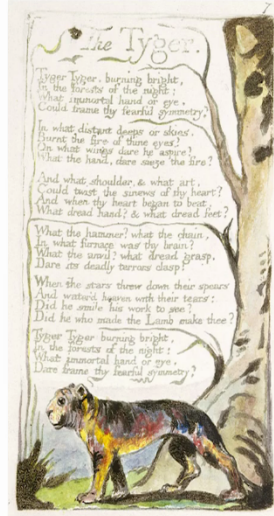


So, clearly Blake links sublimity to the human inability to comprehend.

He would embody this in his most famous poem, 'the Tyger':

And it's a poem that I do not recite or put up but there is an image that you might possibly want to use that, I just put that up.

(Refer Slide Time: 8:06)



Blake, *The Tyger*



And here is an extended meditation on a sublime creature.

In a course of the poem he would ask, did he who make the lamb, make the? Means, how could you create something as quiet and as docile as a lamb and at the same set of hands in this, in the same Smithy forge a tiger.

(Refer Slide Time: 8:30)

Is there an empirical mind-set that can frame the fearful symmetries of imaginative vision, asks Blake, in Stephen Behrendt's reading.

That there may not be an adequate frame to 'locate' the tiger, and this requires a sublime imagination, is the point.

This exceeds the limitations of the corporeal body.



Blake's larger problem was, is there an empirical mind-set that can frame fearful symmetries of imaginative vision.

Fearful symmetries is of course a Blake phrase and the title of a book on Burke on Blake as well. I'm adapting here Stephen Bernard's reading where he is asking whether there is an empirical mind-set, that can frame limit, restrict the imagine into vision and that's Blake's problem. Blake's problem is...

You should not possess an adequate frame to 'locate' the tiger, you should not require a sublime imagination.

So there is an excessive which is cutting back, this exceeds the limitation of the corporeal body.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:14)

'The most sublime act is to set another before you'

- Blake

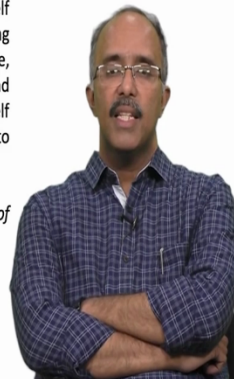


And one point Blake will announce 'The most sublime act is to set another before you'. Here is an excerpt from Matthew Green's visionary materialism in the early works of William Blake.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:25)

There is perhaps a twofold aspect to this act. Along with the act of preferment, of giving deference to the other, arises a certain question of visibility. On the one hand, setting the other, any other, before me would mean placing her or him in front of myself publicly, in the sight of every other. But, on the other hand, setting the other before me implies placing the other in front of me, bringing her or him into my own line of sight, opening my eyes and receiving the gifts of alterity – for in beholding the other, the self runs the risk of becoming what it beholds, it subjects itself to infiltration to the potential of interpenetration, of love.

Matthew Green, *Visionary Materialism in the Early Works of William Blake*



Matthew Green will write, there is perhaps a twofold aspect to this act of carving and crafting a sublime, along with act of preferment, of giving deference to the other, arises a certain question of visibility. So is it something that is purely about the ocular Matthew Green will (09:43) bringing her or him into my own line of sight zoom, visibility. The self runs the risk of becoming what it beholds, it subjects itself to infiltration to the potential of interpenetration, of love.

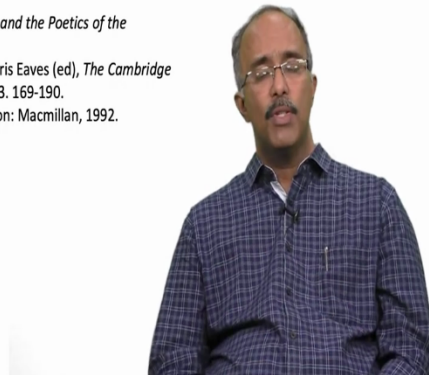
One of the things you notice about Blake, both his illustration, his image making and of course of the poetry, is emphasis on energy and dynamism, on movement. Blake one suspects would not have been happy with something as quiet as docile as a picturesque. The Sublime is meant to communicate the energy of nature. Those of you who know Blake will be able to identify the fact that Blake's interest lay almost entirely in energy, questions of energy, of dynamism, of creativity because energy for Blake is not destructive, in fact its sublimity is what drives your creativity.

So, you need to remember that for Blake the sublime is something positive, something necessary, it's the sublime that energises the imagination that generates creative acts. So, for Blake energy should not be restricted or limited.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:00)

Additional/Recommended Reading

Vincent Arthur de Luca, *Words of Eternity: Blake and the Poetics of the Sublime*. Princeton UP, 1991.
David Simpson, 'Blake and Romanticism', in Morris Eaves (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*. Cambridge UP, 2003. 169-190.
Stephen Behrendt. *Reading William Blake*. London: Macmillan, 1992.



For Blake the key is to generate creative images out of a restlessness. So, the sublime is actually a positive thing, in Blake the sublime is not something to be afraid of, the sublime is something you draw upon. Thank you.