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ELEVEN

Differend, Sexual Difference,
and the Sublime

Lyotard, Irigaray, Duras

ANDREW SLADE

"It's still the sublime in the sense that Burke and Kant described and yet it isn't their sublime anymore."

—Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman*

IN "IN THE PENAL COLONY," Franz Kafka fixes the punishment for the crime as the inscription of the law onto the body of the criminal. The spectacular mechanisms of punishment scrawl their needles over the flesh of the criminal who succumbs to the pain inflicted on him by the device. The body of the criminal thus stands in the place of the law which is illegible on the body, but still *on* the body. In 1985, Marguerite Duras reports² on the infanticide, Christine Villemin, who was accused of killing her four-year-old son, Gregory, and then of putting his body, already dead, into the dark waters of the Vologne river.

Literature and crime, it seems, are never terribly distant. The acts of the criminal generate an entire history of writing, of pleasure, of terror, even the banality of pleasure and terror. In Sade, the notion of the crime is elevated to a supreme metaphysical principle.³ In order to out-nature Nature, to annihilate its destructive powers, crime is unleashed as a mode of resistance.

Yet, it's shocking, even scandalous, when the crime and the criminal are unified into that domain of literature which is as uncertain and ubiquitous as

the sublime. Nonetheless, with the audacity that characterized much of her life, Marguerite Duras, in fewer than four thousand words, introduces into the history of writing and philosophy (though the latter, perhaps, inadvertently) an understanding of the sublime which resists abstract spiritualization by locating itself in the body of the woman-criminal. "Sublime, Necessarily Sublime, Christine V." is Duras's contribution to a feminist figuration of the sublime that mobilizes the thought of the sublime against those forms of domination that men engage and mobilize against, and often on behalf of, women.

The aim of this chapter will be to articulate how two key feminist writers, Marguerite Duras and Luce Irigaray, engage and rewrite Lyotard's interest in the sublime as a feminist aesthetic category. Jean-François Lyotard was at the vanguard of a retrieval of the category of the sublime in contemporary aesthetic theory. A trenchantly polymorphous philosopher, he wrote of the sublime in a range of styles that rivals the old masters of aesthetics, who not only mastered the thought, but were themselves sublime in their works. Whereas the tradition of aesthetics almost unequivocally aligns the sublime with the masculine and the feminine with beauty, Irigaray and Duras invent a feminist sublime that seeks to be a source of resistance and transformation of oppressive and repressive elements of Occidental aesthetics and politics.

Lyotard and Irigaray focus their thinking on the critical differences that have been mobilized by the history and politics of the Occident and each in their own way seeks out the sites of resistance that can be engaged against its hegemony. For Irigaray, in her texts of the 1970s, resistance begins with the deconstruction of the cultural and philosophical heritage which forgot the sexual difference as the primary difference. Lyotard's main project is to locate differends and search for ways to phrase them.

In this search, I will turn to a discussion of Marguerite Duras's article, "Sublime, Necessarily Sublime, Christine V.," as a critical intervention in the debate about the sublime and the sexual difference that I am opening between Lyotard and Irigaray. In 1984, four-year-old Gregory Villemin was killed and his body was found in the Vologne river. In the quiet, even quaint, industrial villages of the Vosges Mountains of northeast France, the "Villemin affair," as it was called, generated much spectacle and speculation. As happens with many murder cases which contain certain elements of intrigue and scandal, this one too produced a deluge of journalism in France and abroad. Perhaps no other article about this murder has generated as much scandal as Marguerite Duras's article, "Sublime, forcément, sublime, Christine V.," which ran in *Libération* on 17 July 1985, roughly nine months after the body of Gregory Villemin was found. Duras's article forcefully articulates a version of the sublime linked to sexual difference and shows it to be a way of bearing witness to the differend that the difference is. By gathering together Lyotard's understanding of the sublime and Irigaray's insistence on the sexual differ-

ence, feminist aesthetic theory will find a mode of articulation which preserves pleasure while accounting for the pain of the past and remaining hopeful about the possibilities of the future.

LYOTARD AND THE SUBLIME SENTIMENT

The feeling of the sublime puts us in touch with pain. Lyotard explains: "Sublime feeling is in no way a happy disposition of thought. The powers of thought in sublime feeling in no way relate to one another according to a good proportion; they 'disproportion' themselves violently."⁴ This pain must be understood in two senses; first, the pain in the sublime sentiment belongs to thought. That is, in a judgment of the sublime, the faculties of the mind are related by their "disproportion." They are interminably conflicted. The power to conceive (Understanding) and the power to present (Imagination) enter an impasse in which neither power can carry out its proper function. The sublime is then a disaster for thought because it blocks it from carrying out its mission, which in the Kantian philosophical system is the actualization of the supersensible vocation of Man.⁵ Second, it is the pain that belongs to bodies. Violence directed to bodies *may* become a source for sublime sentiment when that violence does not come too close to the subject. That is, when the subject endures or is threatened by pain, but is not annihilated by it, the subject's survival may become a source of sublime sentiment.

The sublime undoes thinking without fully dismantling it. It jams thinking. The stakes of the aesthetic of the sublime are neither moralization nor aestheticization of life, but a description of feeling and the thought that accompanies it. If we follow Lyotard, thought must avoid trying to map, by analogy or other means, its feelings onto knowledge of objects. But, it must also find a way to link feeling to the real, to the event that occasions the feeling. Art will be this place.

In a judgment of the sublime, thought seeks to present the unrepresentable. Imagination engages in the work to make a presentation of an event, a happening, an occurrence, that resists being rendered sensibly by dint of its magnitude or might. The sublime feeling is a differend between the absolute that thought seeks to present and the greatest possible aesthetic magnitude that can be apprehended by the senses. Thought presents the absolute, but the absolute cannot be given sensibly to be judged by the categories of the understanding. The sublime feeling is occasioned by this constitutive failure of thought, by its incapacity to present the magnitude (conceived either mathematically or as a force, a power, a might) of the real. Nonetheless, thought is destined for the absolute which eludes aesthetic presentation:

Presentation cannot grasp an infinite of givens at one time and in a single form. If it is asked to present more, it comes up against its maximum, its

“measure,” which is the subjective foundation of all magnitude. This measure is the absolute of the thought that presents the absolute “aesthetic” magnitude that is possible.⁶

Presentation is an activity of the mind and, as a human function, is limited. This means that there are magnitudes that the mind simply cannot grasp, to be sure, but magnitudes that cannot even be considered in their entirety. Such magnitudes are unrepresentable.

In the sublime, Imagination, the faculty of presentation, touches its limit. This measure, the limits of what is possible for Imagination to present, is at first directed toward Nature, as is all of Kant’s *Critique*. But it has important consequences for modern art and literature. As Lyotard notes,

Beginning with Mallarmé, and perhaps even Jean Paul, the aesthetic negatives, the thinking about writing, the reflection on modern art, have put forward the thing before which thinking retreats and toward which it races. What is certain is that, with the sublime, the “happiness” with which creative imagination opens thinking to the unlimited field of aesthetic Ideas has disappeared. Gone is the superabundance, the supplement to naturalness that had come with an analogizing talent to extend “actual nature” and overwhelm the thinking of this nature.⁷

Art is sublime there where it seeks to show the Idea—it is sublime where its object is absent. Not absent because it has simply yet to materialize, but because it cannot be rendered sensibly. This is not an idealist trap that ultimately praises ideas over matter, prefers ever longed-for absences over the brute givens of material life, but a critical philosophy which bears witness to the force of the Absolute. The differend in the sublime feeling opens onto a theory of the subject which understands and accounts for the historical minimalization of the Being that calls itself human.

To be human demands that the inhuman dwell in the human, not as parasite or disease, but as constitutive element, as that which belongs properly to us together with all those “human” attributes we relish in accepting. By focusing on the constitutive inhuman in the conditions of an inhuman system of development, one can hope to resist the apparently infinite desire to consume. We can hope to think and write such that we can testify to our own inhumanity as a site of resistance in the system. In Lyotard’s view, we must mine the strength within that secret which inhabits us and cannot be incorporated into the system. The work of philosophy, the work of literature, shall be to bear witness to the opacity that generates resistance. This owes much to *The Differend* and the famous notion that what remains to be done is to bear witness to the differends, those conflicts without rules which would permit their just resolution. But here, the notion of witnessing is expanded to include at least three additional names for the differend: the inhuman, childhood, and gender.

Although not unaware of or insensitive to the difference that gender makes, Lyotard nonetheless inflects the question of the sexual difference into his own lexicon and treats it as a case of differend. Leaving aside the advantages and difficulties of such a move, I would like instead to link Lyotard's interest in the sublime to Luce Irigaray's concern for the sexual difference so as to begin to see the difference that gender makes in an aesthetic theory of the sublime. So it is to the early works of Luce Irigaray, notably, *Speculum, de l'autre femme*, that I will now turn.

IRIGARAY, DURAS, AND A FEMINIST SUBLIME

Luce Irigaray does not claim to be writing aesthetics, but rather a critical philosophy in which the sexual difference is the central term. The sexual difference is not opposition or antagonism, but a difference like the ontological difference that the philosophical tradition of the West has forgotten.⁸ The sexual difference is the difference that has been repressed, ignored, oppressed, as the case may be. The essays in the middle part of *Speculum, de l'autre femme*, a book whose title is poorly translated into English as *Speculum of the Other Woman*, aim to think through the difference that sexual difference makes for philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literature.

In the text, "*La Mystérique*," Irigaray writes primarily of pleasure, specifically of woman's pleasure and the presence of the divine or the infinite. The discussion of pleasure places her in the center of aesthetics, even when she is resistant to that placement:

No image, no figure alleviates such mortal absence. No picture, no portrait, no face could serve to ease the waiting, even if they were available in this lack of all defined form. Finding the self imposes a *proximity* that knows no aspect, mode, or figure. No metaphors can designate the radiant splendor of that touch. Any intermediary would risk deferring the fleeting *moment* of its coming. Not even a supportive, evocative *milieu* can sustain, prepare, or recall its intuition. An addition or adornment might cosset the touch into a complacency incompatible with the difficult trail it must blaze. Like a bolt out of the blue.⁹

Irigaray resists aesthetics yet nonetheless engages a repertoire of images and signs that go along with it. Her resistance to an aesthetic turn is understandable. One of the key strategies mobilized in the Occident against the claims of women has been to transform the problem of sexual difference into an aesthetic problem and thereby to defuse the pressing question of the difference. That is, women can be tamed as a menace to thought by making them primarily objects to be regarded from the perspective of their beauty. From this perspective, psychoanalysis can get on with its concern for the phallus while the philosophical tradition can pass over their resistance to its

categories by aligning women and the sexual difference with philosophically frivolous categories. Aesthetics, after all, is *at least* secondary to metaphysics and the philosophy of man.

Notwithstanding her resistance to the aesthetic dismissal of the question of sexual difference, Irigaray remains in the field of aesthetics, and specifically in the context of the sublime. It is a sublime affect that is at the core of "*La Mystérique*," and that affect is bound to a set of figurations in her text. A feminist understanding of the sublime, then, will follow upon Irigaray's insistence that the sexual difference is the fundamental (and fundamentally forgotten) question of philosophy. The sexual difference is the primary difference that philosophy must think. It is primary in two senses; it is logically first, and it is unavoidable. For Irigaray, the sexual difference is the first difference that thought encounters—the subject differentiates itself from other subjects based on this difference. It is primary also in the sense that it is unavoidable; any thought that takes itself seriously as articulating a phenomenologically adequate account of being must account for this difference.

The introduction of the sexual difference will not, as one might think, displace the force of the sublime as a category of aesthetics, even though it has a long history of articulations that situate it along the axis of masculinity. In his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant writes,

Women have an inborn feeling for all that is beautiful. . . . They have very delicate feelings in regard to the least offense, and are exceedingly precise to notice the most trifling lack of attention and respect toward them. In short, they contain the chief cause in human nature for the contrast of the beautiful qualities with the noble, and they refine even the masculine sex. I hope the reader will spare me the reckoning of the manly qualities, so far as they are parallel to the feminine, and be content only to consider both in comparison with each other. The fair sex has just as much understanding as the male, but it is a *beautiful understanding*, whereas ours should be a *deep understanding*, an expression that signifies identity with the sublime.¹⁰

In citing this passage from Kant's *precritical* writings, I am not trying to roast Kant. But his text illustrates the philosophical and cultural prejudice that existed (and exists) in relation to woman, and especially the aesthetic understanding of woman and her capabilities. Man is sublime; woman is beautiful. And there is no mistaking the fact that it is better to be in league with the sublime than with the beautiful, even if Kant has some difficulty, in the *Critique Of Judgment* at any rate, in dealing with the excrescence of the sublime. With the precritical text, there is no mistaking the priority given to the sublime. Irigaray's text, then, reconfigures the sublime at the same time as she raises the question of the sexual difference.¹¹

A feminist sublime will inflect the sentiment toward the sexual difference, will find in the "irremediable differend of gender"¹² a source and site of

sublime affect. The aim of this transformation will then be to render the aesthetic sentiment in such a way that it can find the means of figuration that will further the critical project “at least of maintaining the honor of thinking.”¹³ The sublime and sexual difference combine as partners in a critical, philosophical project of bearing witness to their differend. The violence of a differend, especially the differend that yields sublime affect, requires a witness. Yet, the question of how to witness remains unanswered.¹⁴ Irigaray poses the question as a matter of survival. Irigaray therefore asks,

But how can she continue to live in such a violence, sweet as it may be? Not dying of dying, dying from not dying. Undecidable at the time of the most horribly electrifying moment in her jouissance or her pain.¹⁵

The ecstatic pleasures of the body's enjoyment together with the pains of that enjoyment are also the hallmark of Duras's writing and one of the primary experiences of the women that people her novels. Lol V. Stein is no exception, though a more continued use of the theme is made in *L'Amant* where the phrase “jusqu'à en mourir,” “all the way to death,” occurs many times in the context of the pleasures the bodies of lovers create. For Lol, as for the narrator of *L'Amant*, the body's pleasures are not primary, but are the signs of an interiority barred from communing with the other. The company of lovers is an isolated one, one doomed by the uncrossable passage between them. Irigaray describes it like this is:

In a deeper unity than the yet, already, speculative unity that underlies the sense of these wrenching contradictions. The bottom, the center, the most hidden, inner place, the heart of the crypt to which “God” alone descends when he has renounced modes and attributes.¹⁶

Both Irigaray and Duras appeal to “God,” an appeal that can mean much or little. For Duras, it means almost nothing. God becomes the name of that terrifying and electrifying “presence” which inhabits the woman, takes her over, ravishes her, leaving her spent, exhausted.

Pain and delight, dying of dying, dying of not dying, these senses confound each other in the undecidable situation of the differend—the case of dispute in which the rule for resolution lacks. “*Fond, et centre, lieu le plus intérieur et le plus caché, cœur de la crypte, où seul «Dieu» descend après avoir renoncé ses modes et attributs*” “Ground and center, the most interior and hidden space, heart of the crypt where only God descends after having renounced all modes and attributes.”¹⁷ Irigaray, Lyotard, and Duras draw our thinking toward those unthought regions of experience where our cognitive capacities become less and less relevant—this is to say, beyond the capacity for conceptual analysis and explication. The force of determinative claims in this region is suspended, even God is put into quotation marks, in Duras's text no less than in Irigaray's. Between quotation marks, God is unrecognizable as

God. The most sublime words are undone, evacuated of their grandeur in *this* articulation of the sublime, but still no less sublime. In her study of the word "Dieu" in Duras's works, Christiane Blot-Labarrère¹⁸ concludes that the word is neither negation nor affirmation. It rather invokes the "indecipherability of the universe." She closes her essay,

Je pense donc qu'elle s'est constamment heurtée à "une religieuse incapacité de croire." Qu'elle s'est tenue, quant à Dieu, dans une île au loin, une Désirade, face à une présence-absence, à un mot-silence. Mais dirais-je avec Olympia Alberti: "Quel éclat ce silence . . . Quel appel que cette absence-là."

I think, then, that she is continually hurled toward "a religious incapacity to believe." That she has fled, relative to God, to a distant island, a Désirade, before a presence-absence, a silence-word. But, I would say with Olympia Alberti: "What noise this silence. . . . What allure that absence."¹⁹

My concern is not the religiosity of these women, but the manner in which they are able to wrench new significations from the signs of language and the residua of a culture which works to silence them. The sublime which they mobilize inaugurates a revolution within language which undoes the signification of language. The classic account of the sublime (Kant, Burke) does not permit such shifting, though it is hard to see how the violence of the sentiment and its "causes" would leave any domain of thought and experience untouched, unmoved, untransported:

But how to remember all this if the fire was so fierce, the current so strong as to remove all traces? If everything has become fire and water and nothing remains but a burning shimmer and flowing stream? If the brazier was so deep as to erase all memory of the path of touch that still guides us in our ecstatic transports? If nothing remains but/of an incandescent hearth that none can reach?²⁰

The challenge of this sublime is to find, to refind (*retrouver*), in the fluidity of the remainders, a path for the thinking and writing of being which can attach itself to the material of the experience.

And in this rapturous vision of the place of your joyous expansion and mortal ecstasy, *a lightning flash has lit up the sleeping understanding within me.* Resisting all knowledge that would not find its/my sense in this abyss.²¹

The striking similarity of lexica, the registers of metaphor, the images that the two writers, Duras and Irigaray, employ open the possibility of comparison, but even more, open the way to an interpretation of the sublime as always marked by the sexual difference. If Duras's writing is reconceived in the context of this feminist sublime, as a specific name of that kind of writing that Hélène Cixous called for in her famous essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa,"²²

it follows that *écriture féminine* will produce a *sublime féminin*. Duras's writing thereby compounds desires, differences, and differends. This compounding gives her writing its mesmerizing, astonishing, perplexing effects—the vertigo of sublime affect. According to Leslie Hill, desire in Duras's writing, “is mobilised . . . as a sublime and transgressive force that overwhelms any single effort at understanding.”²³ In the dialectic of lack and plenitude that constitutes desire, difference and differend are key to the undoing of understanding (in the technical sense as involving determinative rather than reflective judgment). What is at stake in the writing of the feminine sublime is a feeling and thought's effort to discover what to do with it.

In *The Lover*, Duras characterizes writing as the confounding of differences:

Nowadays it often seems writing is nothing at all. Sometimes I realize that if writing isn't all things, all contraries confounded, a quest for vanity and wind, it's nothing. That if it's not, each time, all things confounded into one through some inexpressible essence, then writing is nothing but advertisement. But usually I have no opinion, I can see that all options are open now, that there seem to be no more barriers, that writing seems at a loss for somewhere to hide, to be written, to be read. That its basic unseemliness is no longer accepted. But at that point I stop thinking about it.²⁴

Writing approaches what is not approachable, what is unqualifiable, what cannot be determined. Writing that does not take this as its aim and source, becomes, according to Duras, advertising, kitsch. Such writing is nothing. When writing and ethics part company, Duras finds a space in and through which she can write of that secret place where those things she has not yet written wait to be written. In *L'Amant*, she writes of those secrets that she had not until then written: “*Ici je parle des périodes cachées de cette même jeunesse*” “Now I'm talking about the hidden stretches of that same youth, of certain facts, feelings, events that I buried.”²⁵ But the notion that writing is that venture into the unknown (and, in my interpretation, the unknowable) can be found throughout Duras's œuvre. As Leslie Hill argues,

Literature, then, for Duras, is a journey into uncharted territory, an exploration of extraordinary states—love, desire, madness—that no longer fall subject to meaning or rational decision and cannot be formulated except in terms of an ecstatic experience at the margin of words and speech.²⁶

The ecstatic experience at the margin of words and speech is the sublime affect born of a differend born of the sexual difference.

THE SUBLIME, THE CRIMINAL: CHRISTINE V.

“Sublime, forcément, sublime” perturbs literature; it binds writing and the crime. Christine V. is trapped by her sex in matter; she is the primary matter of

which woman alone is made. Duras situates Christine V. as the prime woman, prime matter, that stuff which is not determined by any form. It has no significance in the order of things until it has a determining form, which in Aristotelian causality is supplied by the male. As prime matter, Christine V. is sublime in two senses: in the Kantian sense she is antiteleological and without purpose; in the Burkean sense she is an object of terror and herald of death. Christine V. is at the limit of sense and non-sense where Duras writes; she begins to write without aim or foreknowledge, without the capacity to conform to a norm or a law. "It's beyond reason." Beyond reason, yet not sheer madness. Christine V. occupies a zone of senselessness which holds her captive and troubles the men who hold her. Captive and captivating, Christine V. undoes thought's capacity to order and to judge according to its own rules. She exposes to the rules and to reason that they are not universally applicable, that they are sexed, being effects of matter. Even their immateriality is material, matter. Thus, like Lyotard, Duras frames the sublime as the materiality of the immaterial.

Christine V., as the sublime woman, reverses an entire tradition of representation in which woman is valued for her docility and grace. Even when she is a woman as active as Mary grieving the death of her son, she is calm, deferring, accepting; she is not a figure in revolt. Christine V., to the contrary, adopts the most extreme course of action available and repeats Medea's horrifying act. What they do is not just contrary to the law, it is unthinkable. The act is so beyond reason that, as Duras says, it is hard to know how to name the crime. The comparison to Medea is perhaps too hasty, for she knew very well what she was doing, at least according to Euripides. Duras is not nearly so certain that Christine V. knew what was happening to her until it was in the offing. Medea was in charge of her life, even if Jason worked to undermine her at decisive moments; Christine V. lived always under the laws of men and knows little of the self-determination they take as their own without even knowing they are sheltered by it. Christine V. is sublime in as much as she is the limit figure. Her act is incomprehensible; and this should be understood in a technical sense; her act is not available to a judgment of understanding. It is unrecognizable and yields no truth. It is an incommensurable act void of reason and aim; it is contrapurposeful and without purpose, to paraphrase the famous Kantian formulation of the sublime sentiment.

In Duras's text, the fleshly woman, Christine Villemin, becomes Christine V. and is thus transformed from fleshly woman to literary figure. Like the X that Malcolm adopts, her V stands as the sign of all women of a particular situation (class, race) and in which she takes a place in a long line of Durassian characters: Lol V. Stein, Valérie Andesmas. These women trouble and menace every masculine attempt to comprehend them, to hold them together, to place them under their control either conceptually or institutionally. Lol V. Stein is the source of Jacques Hold's undoing; Valérie Andesmas exceeds the limits of her father's control.²⁷

According to Duras, the woman becomes a criminal out of a necessity that precludes her from freedom. Her actions become forced, mechanical, and without sense. This is the manner in which Jacques Hold presents Lol V. Stein's illness. In that novel, Lol's symptoms amount to an anesthesia; she is insensitive, unmoved by her own suffering and boredom. Yet, Christine V. does not know that she seeks a way out of the prison that she inhabits, that the birth of her child is not a celebration, but the beginning of a death: "Why mightn't the birth of a mother by the coming of a child be a miscarriage from the slapping around she gets from a man because of poorly cooked steaks, for example. Just as childhood may be lost from getting slapped for an F in math."²⁸ The mother comes to be because of the coming of the child; she becomes "mother" only with the coming of the child and this transformation is not the fulfillment of her telos, but the sign of her death. It is a miscarriage. Motherhood destroys the woman.

But is this an overstatement? Duras continues: "When women have a child that they do not recognize as their own, maybe it's because they didn't want a child, that they didn't want to live. And in this case, no morality, no penalty will make them recognize that that child is theirs."²⁹ In Duras's writing we find a consistent sense of alienation between mothers and their children. In Duras's text, mothers are astonished by their children; they do not understand how it is that these children belong to them. This is especially the case when the children are relatively undeveloped as characters, that is, when the action of the narrative does not concern them directly, as in *Moderato Cantabile*, *Le Ravissement de Lol. V. Stein*.

Christine V. is sublime, according to Duras, necessarily sublime. This literary figure denotes the conflict of terror and pleasure central to the sublime sentiment. Yet, how is it that the pleasurable moment would redeem the crime at the source of the terror in which her sublime figuration begins? The classical formulation of the sublime tends to make the pleasure of the sublime the key term; there is terror, yet the pleasurable release from that terror limits its bite. But this is not the sublime that Duras invokes; there is no redemption, pleasurable or otherwise, from this crime. Duras could not be more emphatic on this point. She insists that it is incomprehensible; what we are left with is the pain of loss and the astonishment of the presence of this woman who stands alone, bare on a denuded hill. She is completely visible, saturated with visibility there on that hill from which she stands in high relief, yet she cannot be grasped. Her presence affirms to us two things: the abiding nature of pain in the sublime sentiment and the poverty of concepts in relation to a feeling.

The figuration of the sublime sentiment in Duras's works tends to take the form of a metonymy of name and place. The sublime figure is coextensive with the name of a place. In *Hiroshima, mon amour* the lovers' identities are displaced to the site of the initial traumatization and they become, even in

their ecstasies, Nevers and Hiroshima. By the end of the film they are what remains of their pleasure and their pain, but also of pleasure and of pain as such. They are the remains of a history of terror, and they abide as witnesses to that terror—Nevers and Hiroshima. In “Sublime, Necessarily Sublime,” Christine V. is a woman of the hills, a vagabond subject to no law—she is, as the text says, “sans foi, ni loi.” She is also “sans toit ni loi”: a vagabond.³⁰ In *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, the ball at S. Thala is the site where the ravishing appearance of Anne-Marie Stretter crossing the floor astonishes Lol into an illness which destroys her while inaugurating a new kind of life.

The sublime figuration that produces the sublime sentiment is a form of witness. This is the manner in which the sublime is a modality of witnessing; it both transmits the testimony and is the manner of its reception. On this view, testimony and witnessing are not matters of determination of history and the real in and through a concept, but the reflective appropriations of what is improper via a feeling. The testimony never belongs to us even when we cannot forget it, even when we do not know what to do with it, even when it oppresses and terrorizes us, in the bleak, dark night as well as the glory of the sun. Even in that indeterminate, vertiginous haze that is either dawn or dusk. When we avoid the anesthetic option, the sublime sentiment forces us to learn to think with pain, which implies, necessarily, a remainder of thought in the wake of disaster.

NOTES

Chapter epigraph from Jean-François Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” in *The Inhuman*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991), 93.

1. Franz Kafka, “In the Penal Colony,” in *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum M. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1971).

2. Marguerite Duras, “Sublime, forcément sublime, Christine V.,” *Liberation* 7 July 1985. All translations are my own.

3. Pierre Klossowski, *Sade, My Neighbor*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

4. Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 237.

5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, Ind. and Cambridge: Hackett, 1987).

6. Lyotard, *Lessons*, 123.

7. Lyotard, *Lessons*, 68.

8. My argument here is based on my claim that Irigaray is performing an anamnesis of Heidegger’s claim that the tradition of metaphysics in the West has forgotten Being. Irigaray makes an analogous move with respect to gender.

9. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), 195.
10. Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), 77–78.
11. In *Reading in Detail*, Naomi Schor undertakes a similar project, though working largely against (and with) Hegel, she shows that the sublime begins to appear in the minutia of the detail, rather in the strong line with which it had typically been associated. Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1987).
12. This phrase does not belong to Irigaray, but to Lyotard, in “Can Thought Go on Without a Body?,” in *The Inhuman*, 22.
13. Lyotard, *The Differend*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xii.
14. The question of how to bear witness has also been posed by others, notably Robert Harvey in “Telltale at the Passage,” *Yale French Studies* 99 (Spring 2001): 102–16.
15. Irigaray, *Speculum*, 196. I have modified the Gill translation substantially.
16. Irigaray, *Speculum*, 196.
17. Irigaray, *Speculum*, 244.
18. Christiane Blot-Labarrère, “Dieu, un ‘mot’ chez Marguerite Duras?,” in *Duras, Dieu et L’Écrit*, ed. Alain Vircondelet (Paris: Editions du Rocher, 1998).
19. Blot-Labarrère, 199.
20. Irigaray, *Speculum*, 196.
21. Irigaray, *Speculum*, 200.
22. Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs* 1, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen (1976).
23. Leslie Hill, *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 54. Hill elaborates his argument in the context of his discussion of *Moderato Cantabile*.
24. Duras, *L’Amant* (Paris: Minuit, 1984), 14–15, trans. Barbara Bray as *The Lover* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 8.
25. Duras, *L’Amant*, 14; *The Lover*, 8.
26. Hill, 36.
27. Marguerite Duras, *L’Après midi de monsieur Andesmas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962).
28. Duras, “Sublime, forcément sublime, Christine V.”
29. Duras, “Sublime, forcément sublime, Christine V.”
30. The reference here is, of course, to Agnès Varda’s film from 1985, *Ni toit, ni loi*, whose English title is *Vagabond*.