

**Andrew Slade. *Lyotard, Beckett, Duras, and the Postmodern Sublime*.  
New York: Peter Lang, 2007, 136 pp. ISBN 978-0-8204-7862-3**

This work by Andrew Slade (an assistant professor at the University of Dayton, Ohio), considering the postmodern sublime conducted in the intentions of Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998), requires no extensive knowledge of postmodern philosophy or aesthetics. It is, however, not intended as an introduction to Lyotard's aesthetics (which it addresses fragmentarily). It is rather an attempt at an application of Lyotard's theory of 'the painterly sublime and [to extend] it to other figurative works, specifically, works of writing' (p. 49). It comprises five chapters. The first examines the possible contents of the postmodern art of the sublime, including the question of their legitimacy and sense – it therefore also examines the question of what is to be represented through such art; the second provides an overview of Lyotard's positions on the role of the sublime in postmodern art – it is an investigation of questions of how and why to represent in order for art to achieve its goal; the third and fourth chapters concentrate on an analysis of the works of Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) and Marguerite Duras (1914–1996) with regard to the category of the sublime – here Slade tries to verify Lyotard's conception of the sublime by applying it to his readings of the texts of these authors, which he analyzes in terms of both form and content. By this he intends to demonstrate that the works may be properly understood only on the basis of a postmodern conception of the sublime. The fifth chapter is a summarizing conclusion.

In the first chapter Slade states that the goal of the book 'is to defend the aesthetics of the sublime as a mode of witnessing historical trauma' (p. 3). By narrowing the aim of the aesthetics of the sublime to this, the study may directly address an observation of the ability of the sublime (also in an artistic context) to fulfil the task that Lyotard has attributed to it. Lyotard, Slade remarks, 'famously announces that what remains for thought is to bear witness to differends' (p. 4). Slade dextrously links the insoluble antagonism (differend) analysed by Lyotard with the considerations of the American psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, who has focused on an examination of 'the subjective effects of technologies and practices of mass death [...] and [has linked] his studies to the catastrophes of the modern world, Auschwitz and Dachau, Hiroshima' (pp. 2–3). In an imaginary intersection of the considerations of Lyotard and Lifton, Slade locates the key categories of the book: (1) the 'survivor ethos', which for the author means 'the effect of material losses related to traumatic historical events, and the effect of the loss of an idea, the idea of the human' (p. 4); (2) 'psychic numbing', understood as a 'defensive, anesthetic stance taken against a world in which violence

threatens annihilation of the subject' (p. 6) and which is manifested in a blocking or breakdown of images of past traumas and feelings connected therewith, or their displacement into 'traumatic memory', but he also observes the 'anticipatory numbing [which] defends the psyche from future terrors' (p. 7); (3) the 'aesthetic of the postmodern sublime' is then a point of departure for which it is necessary, according to Slade, to abandon the concepts of the eighteenth century, or to combine them with those from the end of the twentieth century, as Lyotard did (p. 20), in order for us to reconstruct the range of the sublime in the present day, in which an aesthetic of the sublime 'seeks to find a way to present the events of terror and death that preserves their terror without reproducing it' (p. 14). From this point it is sufficient to take a single step to one of Lyotard's fundamental theses, which sets a clear target of (post)modern art – namely, constantly to present in experiment that the unrepresentable exists. Through such a prism Slade undertakes to analyze the work of Beckett ('Beckett's creations attempt to attain to the height of the unrepresentable, the un-imaginable, the unnameable' [p. 16]) and Duras ('I will argue that Duras's texts [...] seek to invent that which cannot be presented; she seeks to invent the sublime as the presence of that object which refuses presentation in the real' [pp. 16–17]).

Before Slade undertakes a specific application and search for connections between literary texts and a postmodern conception of the sublime, he presents the reader with a view of Lyotard's thought concerning the sublime what it means for the current discussion of this category and its application in the realm of art. The author skilfully presents the Kantian lineage of Lyotard's sublime, in particular by way of the central question on the role that the sublime plays in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), which the postmodern philosopher adopts and contemplates anew. This adaptation Lyotard presents in his key text, *Le Différend* (Paris: Minuit, 1983) where he locates an irrevocable contradiction at the level of phrase regimes. These regimes are mutually untranslatable for 'when we pass from cognitive phrases to aesthetic phrases, we also pass into a different mode of thinking: the regime in which the phrase participates dictates the legitimate and illegitimate judgments about these phrases' (p. 23). Slade, following on from Lyotard, links the concept of the differend to a feeling of the sublime: 'sublime feeling is the sign of a differend that lies between the absolute that thought seeks to present and the greatest possible aesthetic magnitude that can be apprehended by the senses' (p. 22), 'sublime feeling is a paradoxical feeling, [...] [it] is the effect of a differend and is produced by the heterogeneity of the thinking' (p. 33).

Further problems that Slade analyzes in Lyotard (for example, the postmodern sublime as a mode of artistic response to a trauma in history;

Lyotard's understanding of otherness linked to the concept of the 'inhuman', and the relationship of the modern and postmodern in Lyotard and its transformations) demonstrate that the author of the book can find his bearings within diverse texts and can join together diverse aspects of Lyotard's thought and present them within the relatively small space of a single chapter. Slade also poses the question of art, particularly with respect to the loss of the field of the representable: '[H]ow can art continue when it seems that art cannot continue?' (p. 46) According to Lyotard the artist must necessarily address a new content. In Slade's words the artist must 'begin to approach matter without forms' (p. 46), an assertion that is supplemented by Lyotard's formulation: 'The matter I'm talking about is "immaterial," an-objectable, because it can only "take place" or find its occasion at the price of suspending these active powers of the mind' (pp. 46–47).

At several points in the book Slade notes that Lyotard's conception of the sublime is not strictly Kantian, but also embraces, amongst other factors, the influence of the ideas of Edmund Burke. Explicitly we find this within the text of the book also in the sub-chapter on avant-garde art, where Slade observes Lyotard's having been inspired by the work of the American painter Barnett Newman, for whom the temporal aspect of the sublime was very important. In Kant, however, in contrast with Burke, this does not play any role, at least according to Slade and Lyotard. In Lyotard the sublime is linked to the consideration of a negative sentence, to silence at the moment of becoming, when we in fact do not even see the possibility of formulation of any type of sentence. The then minimal time of becoming of the sentence, a time of seeming simultaneity or immediacy, is transformed into an immeasurable time of threat, shock, when an immediate impediment to life forces takes place. The caesura between the present time (of the sentence that has already 'become') and the time of becoming (of a possible sentence) has the character of a conflict. It is a moment of uncertainty turned towards the question of the conservation of continuity. From the Lyotardian perspective the art of the Avant-garde as well as of the postmodern, subscribes to this caesura. On first appearances, the claim that Kant has not much to offer concerning the temporal dimension of the sublime seems entirely reasonable. Kant's sublime has, however, a distinctively temporal character; it has a dual-stage structure (the oscillation between repulsion and attraction that constitutes the sublime feeling),<sup>1</sup> which is inconceivable without the aspect of time. Unlike Slade, Lyotard was probably aware of this aspect in Kant's understanding of the

<sup>1</sup> Wenzel, Christian Helmut (2005). *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics: Core Concepts and Problems*. Malden: Blackwell, p. 106.

mechanism of the sublime (the accenting of time), and so he asserted that his sublime was constantly within the intentions of Burke and Kant, but was no longer their sublime,<sup>2</sup> an idea that Slade adheres to without further argument.

With the posited criteria that we have attempted briefly to summarize, Slade examines the works of Beckett and Duras with the aim of verifying the possibilities of their application and also of showing us new methods, modes, or forms of presenting the unrepresentable. The author applies Lyotard's reading to Duras and Beckett, in which the texts, regrettably, serve only as examples. Slade discovers the sublime in Beckett's works 'as the pursuit of an impossible silence' (p. 16); according to Slade much is evident from the fact that 'Beckett's texts are figurations of the ruined subject', and when he presents the traits of his characters he states, 'human character is at the limit of humanity and runs the risk of passing over into the grey zone of the inhuman', and that these characters thus participate 'in an anamnesis of the human and inhuman'. (pp. 53–54) For Slade, Beckett becomes an example of experimental writing that requires experimental criticism (pp. 58–59), an understanding of his texts requiring a surrender of attempts to understand by means of determinate judgements, favouring, instead, reflective judgements (pp. 54–55), precisely as is required by their inherent relationship to the category of the sublime. In this connection Slade forwards the concept of 'Beckettlessness', which he applies to two not-so-recent publications on Beckett by two contemporary authors, Thomas Trezise<sup>3</sup> and Leslie Hill.<sup>4</sup> 'Beckettlessness', writes Slade, 'is the result of a critical drive to explain, to understand; it is a condition that infects Beckett criticism and manifests itself as the critic's desire to have had the last word on Beckett' (p. 60). The confrontations with Trezise (Trezise's classification of Beckett as a poststructuralist rather than as an existentialist) owing to their ability to identify the crucial points of different interpretations, represent some of the stronger moments in the book. Slade relates Beckett's work to the category of the sublime by asserting that the 'sense of the ruined body is coextensive in Beckett's works with the ruins of the mind, the ruined ideas of modernity, and will be the main theme for our consideration of the sublime in his works' (pp. 53–54).

What does this mean, however, in its consequences? Slade notes that it is precisely the 'idea of Man that Beckett's sublime seeks to reconfigure; it is an

<sup>2</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François (1985). 'The Sublime and the Avant Garde.' *Paragraph*, 6, pp. 1–18.

<sup>3</sup> Trezise, Thomas (1990). *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature*. Princeton: Princeton UP.

<sup>4</sup> Hill, Leslie (1990). *Beckett's Fiction: In Different Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

effort to remember what Enlightenment ideology had already [...] forgotten' (p. 54). Beckett's work in Slade's interpretation and analysis speaks of an 'impossible continuity' (p. 57), attests to 'the deflation of the idea of Man [...], deflation of human being to inhuman form' (p. 64). Slade discusses Beckett's novel *The Unnamable* (1953), in which the narrator, the unnameable, continues to exist 'under the questions imposed by the obligation [...] to speak' (pp. 67–68). In Beckett's work the sublime is conceived by Slade as a 'sublime of the worst' (p. 71), in which 'Beckett's understanding of the worst does not imply an ethical claim, but an epistemological and ontological claim' (p. 78).

In the fourth chapter the author subjects several of Duras's texts to analysis, and with the help of the ideas of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray comes to the characterization of a feminist sublime as that which 'will inflect the sentiment toward the sexual difference, will find in the "irremediable differend of gender" [Lyotard's phrase] a source and site of sublime affect' (p. 92). Through the interpretation of Duras, the feminist sublime is shown to be a state reflecting the 'ecstatic pleasures of the body's enjoyment together with the pains of that enjoyment' (p. 92), and is recognized as Lyotard's differend. Slade interestingly asserts that '[s]hame [a key word in Duras's texts] is an effect of the sublime sentiment and thereby links the feeling to ethics. The sublime is not an ethical feeling, but it can give rise to one or more of them (guilt, responsibility, respect)'. This is a surprising standpoint, which Slade supplements with the assertion that the 'problematics of testimony as raised by Lyotard, Agamben, and others, draws the disparate fields of philosophy together, making it difficult to continue to honor the disciplinary boundaries of Enlightenment Reason' (p. 98). At times, it seems that Slade is adopting Lyotard's position in its entirety, and together with Lyotard does not reflect on the ethical dimension of the sublime, which was continually present throughout history and the sublime was understood also as a category of ethics, precisely towards which Kant created the imaginary boundary which conceived of the sublime as an aesthetic category. But in discussing Duras, he states that a sublime feeling possibly leads to ethical feeling, while elsewhere he inclines towards Lyotard and does not distinguish the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of the sublime.

The final chapter is devoted particularly to the question of the truth of a testimony 'about the terrors of history'. The example presented by Slade, 'a video testimony of a woman and survivor of Auschwitz' (p. 111), which was later commented on by historians as highly improbable, raises the question about the truthfulness of literary testimonies. To inquire into their truthfulness is highly questionable, and, moreover, with regard to the question of truthfulness Slade compares real testimony with artistic fiction that operates with

'testimony'. This equation only confuses things. To throw open a consideration of the truthfulness of literary fiction is a step, that equalizes the real and the fictional, and thus leads to an inadequate assessment of the work and destroys its basis. According to Slade, 'literary testimonies borrow their expectation of being true from the demands of the law, namely, that the witness tell the whole truth' (p. 114), which then leads to a Lyotardian differend. One would therefore ask Slade (and perhaps Lyotard as well): How can a work of art become a testimony about a testimony (or a testimony about an inconsistency), without ceasing at that moment to be a work of art?

Slade's book is not a unique contribution to the current investigation of the category of the sublime. Rather, it is merely an attempt to summarize aspects of the postmodern sublime as presented by Lyotard. This excessively narrow orientation to Lyotard's thought diminishes somewhat the merits of the book. Ultimately, the book is merely a confirmation of the relevance of the category of the sublime as means of critical assessment of some works of literature. It would have been more interesting to open up this theme in relation also to other French philosophers, in particular Jean-Luc Nancy, as well as Baldine Saint Girons or Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.<sup>5</sup>

Also, Slade's interpretations of Lyotard remain contestable. Slade asserts, for example, 'Lyotard refrained from linking the sublime to ethics and politics' (p. 14). But this is not precise. The relationship of aesthetics and politics for Lyotard is conducted by way of the category of the sublime, though this is an analogous relationship, which does not reduce politics to aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> Lyotard counters any confusion by saying: 'As for a politics of the sublime, there is no such thing. It could only be terror. But there is an aesthetic of the sublime in politics. Actors or heroes in the political drama are always suspect, and always should be suspected of pursuing particular and interested motives. But the sublime affection the public experiences for the drama is not to be suspected.'<sup>7</sup> Or, if the 'sublime is a disaster for thinking, since in the sentiment thinking is blocked from accomplishing its mission, which in the Kantian philosophical system is the actualization of the supersensible vocation of Man' (p. 21), how is

<sup>5</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe (1986). *Poetry as Experience*. Stanford: Stanford UP. Saint Girons, Baldine (1993). *Fiat lux. Une philosophie du sublime*. Paris: Quai Voltaire. Nancy, Jean-Luc (2003). 'The Sublime Offering.' In *A Finite Thinking*. Stanford: Stanford UP, pp. 211–44. Saint Girons, Baldine (2005). *Le Sublime de l'antiquité à nos jours*. Paris: Desjonqueres.

<sup>6</sup> Fry, Karin (2004). 'The Role of Aesthetics in the Politics of J. F. Lyotard.' *Philosophy Today*, 48 (Spring 2004), pp. 87–93.

<sup>7</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François (1993). *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence, 1982–1985*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 71.

it possible to explain, for example, what Kant calls 'subreption (substitution of a respect for the object instead of for the idea of humanity in our subject)?'<sup>8</sup> Is a feeling of the sublime not, on the contrary, the result of this actualization?

Unfortunately the publication also suffers from typos and a poor index, which complicates work with the text (there is, for example, only one reference to Luce Irigaray, and none to Trezise), always an unwelcome surprise in a publication of this kind.

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<sup>8</sup> Kant, Immanuel (2000). *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, § 27, p. 141.