

**The Wuellnerian Sublime:
Rhetorics, Power and the Ethics of Commun(ication)**

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It is a curious, but symptomatic circumstance that it has taken us 10 years to get to the point where we feel comfortable dedicating ourselves as a conference to the question of ethics.¹ It is reflective, perhaps, of the tenuous and often tendentious history of the relationship of rhetorics to ethics: more often than not, the reputation of “rhetoric” has been as the poster child of anti-ethics, of amoral, if not immoral, communicative manipulation. There is clearly good reason for this: no rhetorical theorist has been very successful in arguing that persuasive success and ethical obligation are two, necessarily integral aspects of rhetorical practice, much less theory. Clearly, as early as Plato both the rejection of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* as an-ethical (at best, un-ethical at worst), and recognition of the value of rhetoric to propagation of the truth (once discovered by philosophy) in the *Phaedrus* anticipate much of the history of the relation of ethics to rhetorics throughout the centuries since. By the 16th Century Ramus was, perhaps, correct (albeit in a rather

¹ Even so, many of the presentations made here at the conference choose not to address the issue of ethics directly, but to focus on the role of ethos in relation to the orator. Similarly, the continued preoccupation with exegesis and a historical hermeneutics of reconstruction continue to perpetuate the institutional commitment of so-called “value-neutral” scholarship which both rejects the question of ethics as fundamentally irrelevant to inquiry, and avoids addressing the relationship of the ethics to rhetorics (as both theory and practice) when analyzing these texts.

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obnoxious way) in deriding Quintilian's naïve attempt to found his educational and rhetorical theory and system upon an ideal *vir bonus*. It is a lesson we should all consider seriously: how many of us can speak of an ethical system *within* rhetoric? Until we find a way to speak of the ethics of rhetoric by reference to the communicative act itself, and its relationship to the participants shaping and being shaped by that act, it will always be the case that rhetoric will be vulnerable to future Platonic-Ramist critiques.

It is to this vulnerability that we, as rhetorical critics, must turn in the next decade of conferences, now more so than at any other time since the re-discovery and re-invention of rhetoric which has taken place over the last 20 years. We are facing today what has rightly been described as "an alarming spread of insensitivity to values that are distinctively and indispensably human, especially in the uses of language and speech." The crisis of language can, and has been described as a spiritual crisis "that is at the core of all that is supremely and inalienably human", where "language has become deeply secularized and estranged from its living and fertile roots."

In a recent article, Wilhelm Wuellner has identified at least five critical areas in our cultural and academic contexts of language and communication that contribute to the pending and present crisis confronting us:

1. The loss of sense of the fullness of speech, the mental, but also the physical and spiritual experience of a full-bodied encounter in and through speech.
2. The over-development of the *rational* and its reduction of language and

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communication to abstraction and utilitarian exchange.

3. The social decay of interpersonal relationships through the rise of post-literate culture and technological eclipse of the full scope of human consciousness and experience reduced to 'virtual' replacements of authentic exchange.
4. The paradox that religious and spiritual exploration leads to greater conflict and fragmentation rather than community and communion, a trend made even more problematic by forces of secularism, scientism and technology.
5. Finally, the global re-colonization of peoples and cultures wrought through, and *not* in spite of, the vapidness of the ideals of postmodernity and post-colonialism, creating a radical individualism that renders language devoid of content and communion devoid of power.

On the one hand, to take a limited example, global communication systems have created a world where communication of ideas, ideals, information and free exchange are instantaneous and widely disseminated. Never before have people able to meet, connect and share with one another so quickly, so easily, across borders and continents. On the other hand, the communicative exchange is itself disembodied, a "virtual" space, increasingly dominated by an elite cultural perspective (global free-enterprise capitalism), language (English), and media cartel (American-based multimedia international conglomerates) fraught with the potential of either deadening uniformity, or polarizing fragmentation. Instant communication has been, is, and will be a powerful genie let out of its bottle, full of

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potential and peril.

If we have learned anything from the history of rhetoric, it is that rhetoric's flourish and demise bear an integral relationship to history, culture and communicative contexts. The history of rhetoric reflects not only the profound theoretical changes undergone by both rhetorical theory and practice throughout time, but also how these changes, in turn, reflect important social and cultural breaks, shifts and changes undergone by the West. The current context of our field reflects the growing realization, wrought in no small part by feminist criticism, of the ways in which our context(s) not only shape(s) what we understand, but that they must be acted upon and changed by us.

It is from within this setting that we must address our efforts as rhetorical critics, or face potentially serious consequences not only to our profession, but also to our world. The question that confronts us today is: How does our current context of communicative exchange, with all its perils and promises, shape not just what we do today, but what we *should* do for today and for the future? Given the potential of mass communication technology both to bring together (the elite from) cultures from across the globe with an immediacy never before experienced by humankind, as well as to bring with it a massive and imperialist recolonization of cultures through an anti-humanist medium of technocracy, the task of the rhetor is a profound one.

Yet, despite the profundity of the task, the rhetorical critic and theoretician is ill equipped to contribute to what is fundamentally an *ethical*, not just rhetorical task.

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Enter the Ethical

I do not wish to suggest, however, that we as rhetoricians and biblical scholars are not up to the task. Nor do I wish to give the impression that some efforts are not already underway. Indeed, many have been attempted within our own particular discipline, from the exploration through feminist rhetorical criticisms, to the works of South African scholars of the last decade or more. To cite two quick examples: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's call for biblical rhetorical criticism as a critical rhetoric of inquiry is one such important effort, premised upon a liberal ethic committed to the realization of a radical democracy extended to *all* voices. The relationship of the ethics of a feminist liberatory praxis to rhetorical practice is grounded in ensuring a space wherein such practices are allowed to thrive. My own call for an approach through a rhetorics of power also seeks out the institutional and systemic practices of power that both constrain and produce knowledges. Committed to an ethics of freedom, it does not propose a specific programme of liberation, but employs a rhetorical hermeneutics that views practices of power as symbolic acts of persuasive creation in order to generate a radical critique of the present. While both of these approaches attempt to uplift the ethical commitment and project of rhetorical criticisms, both nevertheless import an independent ethical system into a rhetorical critical praxis (although the former is much closer to providing a theoretical integration of rhetorical-ethical practices than the latter).

Most recently, however, has come another proposal by Wilhelm Wuellner

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for a humanistic rhetorical ethics premised upon a rhetoric of power as the power of the *sublime*. This proposal was initially presented at the second Claremont Conference on “Rhetorics & Hermeneutics” in March, 2000, sponsored by the New Testament Rhetoric Project. It has recently been elaborated in the third Claremont Conference on the “Rhetorics of Healing” in January 2002, co-sponsored by the Centre for Rhetorics & Hermeneutics and the New Testament Rhetoric Project.

This is a rather unexpected, and I suspect controversial suggestion. The term “sublime”, like the term “rhetoric”, is fraught with baggage. It is a loaded term, with a rather difficult, if not outright troubling history of philosophical and aesthetic reflection that would tend to give us pause. Nor is it entirely clear how a return of the sublime to rhetoric can help us navigate any better than previous proposals the complicated issues regarding the relationship of rhetorics to ethics. Nevertheless, I wish to suggest that a rhetoric of power as power of the sublime, as theorized by Wuellner, can offer us some intriguing, albeit tentative results for exploring precisely this relationship.

It is my suggestion that the transformation of rhetorical criticism of the bible into a rhetoric of power as a rhetoric of the sublime, if taken up and considered seriously, may represent a watershed event in the field. The reintroduction of the sublime into rhetorical theory, as suggested by Wuellner’s work, brings new insight into the ethical dimensions of communication. It suggests an important new perspective on how rhetorical practices are ethical practices within the very act of communicative exchange, itself. It also rescues the sublime from the philosophical irrelevance that it has suffered since the development of aesthetic theory, returning

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it to the civic and social spheres of activity and practice. Indeed, what I hope to offer here is how it may represent an important moment for biblical rhetorical studies to impact disciplines far beyond religious studies, a significant shift for a field that has historically turned inward in its discursive and methodological practices.

Enter the Sublime

What is meant by the sublime? Of course, several definitions have been offered throughout the centuries: Excellence in art, speech, idea; the presence or suggestion of transcendent vastness or greatness that cannot be measured or fully comprehended. Both Kant (*Kritik der Urteilskraft* 1790) and Burke (*On the Sublime and Beautiful* 1757) distinguish the sublime from the beautiful: for Burke, it is caused by a mode of terror or pain. Kant also noted the distinction, identifying it as a “negative pleasure” of the mind that contravenes the power of judgment. Much as I am aware of my obligation to attempt to do so, I will not engage with these theories at this point. I choose not to do so for two reasons: 1) they will cause me to embark upon a journey into a disciplinary tradition that, once traversed, will lend little value to the discussion of rhetoric and ethics of immediate interest to us here (or, better: value that is not worth the cost of time and energy devoted to the exploration for our purposes), and 2) the notion, the concept of the sublime developed and used by Wuellner will become clear as we enter the discussion.

What I suggest Wuellner is proposing is a return to and expansion of the rhetorical concept of the sublime as grandeur of thought, speech and spirit, grounding his efforts first in Longinus, in which both the “statement of the subject”

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and the “methods by which we may attain our end” are the stated goal. (*On the Sublime*, i.1) That is, by returning to the sublime to expanded rhetoric, it is not just its definition that we are concerned with, but its pragmatic aspects that come under view: how “excellence in speech” is practiced, what its effects are, and, more importantly, what are the implications for understanding the power of the *spiritual* basis for all language. For rhetoric, the sublime takes us beyond argumentation, gratification and persuasion: “The effect of elevated language upon an audience is not persuasion but *transport*.” Its effect upon the orator is no less dramatic, displaying at once “the power of the orator in all its plentitude.” (*On the Sublime*, I.4)

Many aesthetic philosophers would clearly take issue with this definition as underdeveloped, vague, and far too limited. They are, of course, correct from a certain perspective, and reliance upon Pseudo-Longinus alone would be problematic. This is clearly not the only ground from which Wuellner will draw his reflections. Insights from modern rhetoric, from the history of Romanticism, and from religious traditions and texts, most notably the Bible, also make their contributions. Nevertheless, in contrast to aesthetics, it is not the philosophical *a priori* that is of concern, but the rhetorical concern of communicative and (more importantly) practical effect that will shape the discussion to follow.

If a simple thesis can be extracted from Wuellner’s work on the sublime, it is that fragmentation (of cultures, of the Self), polarization and dehumanization can be overcome through the power of synthesis, organic wholeness, *harmonia* and communion which lie at the heart of the a rhetoric of religion as a rhetoric of the

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sublime. "To speak of rhetoric as power, and now as power of the sublime, is to bring to awareness and into focus how the spiritual is working in the physical." (Wuellner 2002) We have become aware that there is more to rhetoric than stylistics, more to rhetoric than speaking convincingly and persuasively. Rhetoric seeks states of communion [Perelman/Olbrechts-Tyteca], pursues "perfection", directs itself toward the aim of "identification through transformation." [Burke] Once modern rhetorical theory began to explore these very "sacred" concepts, the sublime (re-)enters the picture as a power to heal by embracing what is "distinctively and indispensably human, especially in the uses of language and speech."

The organic unity of the sublime consists of the integration of the sublime in human language (speech, gesture, tone, rhythm) and nature, of the micro- and macrocosmic worlds, including the divine, of which we as humans are a part. It is this "organic whole" that is one of the constitutive elements of the sublime, the "general effect" (*synthesis*) of which is the cooperation (*he allelouchia*) of the natural grandeur of the *kosmos*, our *soma* and the creative human word (*logos*).

[T]he metaphoric, tropic nature of human language calls for the *synthesis* of the proper use of 'figures' and the nobility of phrase, serving 'a who congress of emotions [*pathon synodos*], as well as the 'arrangement', or 'composition'/'order' of the discourse as 'melody'. For in *melody* [*harmonia*] both speaker and audience find 'not only a natural instrument of persuasion and pleasure, but also a marvelous instrument of grandeur [*thaumaston ti organon megalegorias*] and of emotion [*pathous*].' The *harmonia* in rhetoric 'stir[s]...myriad ideas of words, thoughts, things, beauty, musical charm, all of which are born and bred in us [*harmonian logow anthropois emphyton kai tes psyches autes*]...by blending of its own manifold tones it brings into the hearts of the bystanders the speaker's actual emotion so that all who hear [the

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speaker, see the gestures] *share* in [the *harmonia*].’ [On the Sublime, xxxix.1 and 3] (Wuellner 2002)

The biblical testimony to nature's grandeur, related to Pseudo-Longinus' concepts of 'wonder' (*to thaumasion, megaloprepes, megalosyne, megethos, doxa*), contributes to this idea by combining both divine *works* in creation with the creation-ing process of the divine *word* (cf. Psalm 19): nature and art, works and word come together through an incarnational concept of the sublime. Through *nature's* 'grandeur' (encountered in both daily and general events, as well as in special and extraordinary circumstances), the sublime is experienced and expressed also (and integrally) through the creative power of language, through the 'implanted word' which powers us to speak with great boldness, through the 'silent word' that empowers us, through sound and gesture, even to participate in the *koinonia* with 'all things visible and invisible'.

It is nature manifesting and transforming, from and into its cosmic dimensions...It is nature extending from our solar system and Milky Way galaxy to (and from!) the infinities of spaces and times, of energies and powers manifesting on both macro- and micro-cosmic levels: *That* is the full dimension of the power of the sublime accessible to us in “the implanted word” empowers us to speak with great boldness (*polle parrhesia*, 2 Cor 3:12-18), as Mt. Zion is implanted in Mt. Sinai [cf. Hebrews 12:22] (Wuellner 2002)

Through the natural sublime, the rhetorical sublime finds its integral role in all of creation.

From this synthesis of nature, self and language can we begin to explore the synthesis of exoteric/esoteric/emotional levels of language with the thinking/feeling/acting components of language impact upon the experience of

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rhetorical communion through rhetorical process of creation. That is, the sublime in language can be explored at its different levels and different components, not only as integral parts of each other, but as integrated within the larger context of nature and the cosmos. How does the sublime suffuse language and how does this help us understand the deeper profundity of the integrating aspects of rhetorical sublime?

First, the sublime on **exoteric** (body-) level of speech is expressed and impacts not only upon the five-sensory and physical aspects of human expression and experience, but also and necessarily upon the supra-sensory, i.e., mind-consciousness, even sub-consciousness and dream consciousness aspects of existence and communion. Here we focus upon the materiality of communication, which considers not only the rhetorical impact of various communication media, but also physical bodily performances of communication (gestures, intonation; appearance; rhythm and musicality; sound and silence), including the rhetoric of 'visible eloquence'. Sublimity occurs on all levels of communication, not just on the discursive nor only on the physical, but rather as a full-bodied experience. The sublime suffuses the exoteric level of speech by suffusing the sensory, the emotive and imaginative dimensions integrally, as well as the intuitive spiritual dimensions of existence.

Next, the sublime on the **emotional** level concerns the interrelation between speaking, feeling and intuiting, linked with the body level to create a synthesis between emotional and physical activity. Through the modality of emotions, the esoteric (spiritual) world and the exoteric (physical) world combine in the grandeur

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of the sublime to inspire spirit-filled speech. This is the *dynamis* experienced in the *kairotic* entry of 'genuine emotion in the right place', which makes for *megalegoria* grandeur and inspires human speech "as it were with a fine frenzy [*hosper hypomania*] and fills [it] with divine afflatus [*peumatos enthousiastikos*]." (*On the Sublime*, viii.4) If rhetorical *categories* helps us to conceive of the sublime in relation to human language, and *allegories* help us to ponder the feeling of the sublime in relation to human imagination, *megalegories* help us to focus on the supra-linguistic and supra-imaginary: on the invisible in the visual arts, on the inaudible in the musical arts, in the ineffable in the linguistic arts, i.e., "on the spiritual substance incarnated, embodied in the very materiality of rhetoric and power". (Wuellner 2002)

Thirdly, the sublime on the **esoteric** level concerns the *intuitive* essence of cognitional and volitional modalities of language and speech. "As a fully alive human being, one thinks, feels, wills and acts, and one speaks empowered by one's capacity for intuition which can manifest itself in any given situation or context..." (Wuellner 2002) A rhetorical approach to the esoteric focuses upon the power of the spiritual level as it works its way through the integral and organic interaction within the physical and emotional: here is where Burke's 'goadings of mystery', the experience of the 'ineffable' in and through language, gives shape to *all* aspects of language.

By the end of the exploration into the exoteric, the emotive and the esoteric levels of language, Wuellner helps us to begin to see how the sublime serves as an integrative function of all three levels, or, better, shows how all three levels are

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intrinsically integrated while nevertheless distinct. It has been the dis-integration of these levels of language in the history of education, philosophy, rhetoric and culture that has led to the current anemia of communication. Through the sublime, we note their interconnection and can begin to theorize accordingly.

Next to be considered are the three components of language: the thinking, the feeling and the acting. Like the three levels of language, they, too, are organically integrated aspects of expression and experience. They are also integrated within the three levels we have just explored.

The experience of the sublime in **thinking** requires not just the combination of thoughts and ideas into an organic whole (*On the Sublime*, x.1 - *he pros alleela eisynthesis kathaper en ti soma*), but the transformation and redemption of thinking encountered through the diversity of "full-blooded ideas" (*On the Sublime*, viii.1) ideas. The interrelation of thinking and speaking must include not only sensory, but also suprasensory experience and consciousness.

Here [is where] we come to terms with the interrelation between thinking and speaking, and, in turn, speaking's interrelations with 1) our mental imaging born of sensory experiences: what the Greeks called *phantasia* with its free association of thought... What constitutes the thinking component is the ability, indeed the need, to transform the sensory perceptions into concepts - moral, emotional, spiritual. (Wuellner 2002)

Sublimity is impossible in the absence of diversity (uniform ideology, abstraction, limitation of language and thought), as well as in the presence of diversion (and its dispersion of energy and focus).

The experience of the sublime in the **feeling** component of speaking relates to the experience of the power of the sublime in everyday life, the manifestation not

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only of "human/super-human power, nor of simply divine power, but of the balance and integrity of the divine power in human power." (Wuellner 2002) The late-Medieval, early-Renaissance concept of the Divine Comedy was an early effort to display the power of the sublime "in the midst of life's emotional perplexities and vanities." Additional biblical examples can be found: 1) the sublime in the irony of Paul's "fool's speech" in 2 Cor 11; 2) the cancerous (ogkos - *On the Sublime*, iii.4) sublime 'divine comedy' of the 'prodigality' of the son in Luke 15, healed through the transformation of the 'prodigious' homecoming; 3) the sublime nature of human beings as the crowning glory and majesty of creation (Ps 8:5, cf. Heb 2:7); 4) the 'divine comedy' of Israel's, Moses', and Jesus' 'tests' in the wilderness wherein god manifests himself (through angels, manna, the burning bush). "The nature of the rhetorical power in, and of, the divine comedy is not the manifestation of human/superhuman power, nor simply of divine power, but the balance and integrity of the divine power in human power." (Wuellner 2002)

Finally, the experience of the sublime in the **willing/acting** component of speech confronts the active, but more importantly also explicitly the ethical dimensions of rhetoric and communication. Rhetoric has emphasized many, varying aspects of communicative achievements throughout its history. Greco-Roman classical rhetoric emphasized speaking 'artistically'. Later, its emphasis was upon speaking 'correctly' (i.e., logically, philosophically, dialectically). Eventually in the modern era, rhetoric has focused upon speaking 'scientifically'. Through the sublime, however, we now confront a transformation of our awareness of a function of power in rhetoric, an awareness of the 'ethical'.

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James chapter 3 is a whole chapter devoted to the ethics of speaking, nurtured by the 'wisdom from above' and manifesting itself in the fruit of righteousness as speech behavior that is pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable [*eupeithes*], full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy (Jam 3:17)...[I]t is through speech that humans grasp their divine nature, and learn to live with it and unfold it...And in our use of speech and sharing in the creative Word in this hoped for, assured state of perfection, in this our 'inheritance' as 'sons and daughters of God', we will become more and more fully aware of, and empowered to being co-creators with God, Christ and the Spirit. (Wuellner 2002)

Here is, perhaps, one of the most significant contributions of Wilhelm's work: that the sublime helps us to see how, through the will/acting component of language, together with the feeling and thinking components, fundamentally grounds ethics at the heart of any communication and the commitment to become co-creators with god.

Already we begin to note how the exploration of the dimensions of communication as revealed by the presence and experience of the sublime achieves precisely the purpose that has been missing in rhetorical theory, criticism and performance: Integration, synthesis and harmonia through the rhetorical sublime find not only their expression, but their action and interaction upon all dimensions of life and living.

The tropological nature and function of the sublime is too complex to consider with any thoroughness in this particular paper. Wuellner has begun mapping out several aspects, but has left much to be explored. Nevertheless, a few important considerations may be worth exploring.

Through the trope of irony and the argumentative strategy of dissociation,

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we see how how the surface level divisions and diversions of existence are transformed through the sublime into the recognition of a deeper, unifying, harmony of the divine grounding it. Wuellner refers specifically to Gary Salyer's work on Ecclesiastes and the function of the "master trope" of irony,² wherein the sublime is revealed through the strategic 'entrapment' of the reader through the employment of a rhetoric that dissociates the 'apparent' ("life's little absurdities", "the limitation of all branches of human knowledge") from the 'real' ("life's awesome presence"). This, in turn, brings the reader to a point of 'rhetorical transcendence'. Wuellner also makes note of the important insights into the way dissociative strategies reveal the sublime by reference to Clark Gilpen's analysis of "Research in Divinity"³ wherein the dissociation is between "the ephemeral nature of our immediately present joys" and "the ways in which those joys may be revived". Dissociation helps us to see "there is more than meets the eye", forcing us to encounter components (thought, feeling, willing) and levels (body, feeling, intuitive) of language, i.e., unexpected levels of depth to our conceptions and actions otherwise overlooked. It is by listening/peering into these "other" levels that dissociation helps to awaken us to the sublime on *all* levels.

An additional trope of the sublime to consider is that of hyperbole. Schoeni

² Gary Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric: Private Insight and Public Debate in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, JSOT Supp Ser. 327 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

³ Clark Gilpin, "Research in Divinity," *Criterion* 38/3 (Autumn 1999).

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has explored this aspect of Paul's letter to the Romans.⁴ For Schoeni, however, there is a structural necessity for 'coming down,' or 'coming out of' the sublime that must take place, or else 'the relapse from the sublime is fatal'. The sublime must be balanced by the counter-sublime, where the sublime is set apart from the everyday as an exceptional event. Built into this distinction, one which reasonably recognizes the dangers of attempting to maintain too 'high speech' (which include either bombast on the one hand, or triteness on the other), is too great a divide between being 'in the sublime' and 'coming out of the sublime'. Instead, the integral relationship between hyperbole and balance in the sublime must be considered, so as to recognize the *on-going* impact of the sublime upon the everyday. Using a marriage analogy, it is the experience of 'after the ecstasy, the laundry'.⁵

This emphasis upon balance as a trope of the sublime also helps us to see the function of polarities which can, on the one hand, lead to "the power of the blessed excess", or, on the other hand, to the power of confrontation and polarization. Polarity *per se* is not the problem; polarization is. The polarities of Paul's rhetoric in I Cor 15, or in the opening vision of Revelation, are both seen as

⁴ Marc Schoeni, "The Hyperbolic Sublime as a Master Trope in Romans," in Thomas Olbricht and Stanley Porter, eds., *Rhetoric and the New Testament*, 171-192.

⁵ Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry: How the Heart Grows Wise on the Spiritual Past* (New York: Bantam Books, 2001).

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transformative, sublime events. The sublime cannot exist without diversity; harmony cannot exist without multivocality. Skirting on the edge of polarization, transformation is achieved through the sublime entry of a balancing harmony that maintains diversity through integrity. The trope of balance, like dissociative argumentation, reveals the workings of the sublime at all levels of culture, nature, and communication.

Besides communicative tropes and argumentative strategies of the sublime, one must also consider the sublime at work on the level of the materiality of communication. Here is where music, rhythm, harmony, dance, and celebration form another integral aspect of the sublime. Whole *material* aspects of the sublime are in need of greater appreciation by rhetorical critics in their efforts to understand, and become stewards of, the sublime

Finally, any discussion of the sublime must consider the abuses of the sublime, what he terms the sublime 'in default'. Here, Wuellner starts from the four faults of Pseudo-Longinus, and draws out comparisons and extensions from out of the current, (post-)modern context. These are: 1) inflated and superficial ('meteoric') language that distinguishes the euphoric from the sublime; 2) going beyond the sublime into the cancerous (*On the Sublime*, iii.4 - *kakoi de ogkoi kai epi somaton kai logon*) that helps us to identify the abuses of the power of language as symptomatic of and upon the body!; 3) pointless and misplaced emotion (note Eph 5:6 - *kenois logos*; 2 Tim 2:15 - *kenophonia*); 4) frigidity (cold, heartless, vain, insipid - *to psychoron*) in communication; 5) 'post-illiteracy' of our techno-centric culture wherein people cannot identify the content nor the means by which

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messages through multi-media channels are communicated, and 6) the symptomatic excesses of the grotesque, the shocking, the violent that are now the artistic and pop-cultural expressions of the sublime.

Diagnostic clues enable us to discern when the sublime is in default, when it gets sick, even cancerous, or empty and lifeless, which are the symptoms of a power that has become distorted, restrained, or perverted...When the sublime is in default of its true power, it has nothing but dehumanizing effects to proffer; it makes us become inhuman. (Wuellner 2002)

These faults and symptoms find their promulgation throughout both academic culture and communication (its abstract, scientific modalities of thought and speech), in communication cyber-technology, and throughout the discourse of politics, business, religious institutions, etc. It is incumbent upon rhetorical critics not only to acquire and cultivate a critical awareness (a naming and unmasking) of these faults and symptoms, but also to engage with them in order to restore "the balance of harmonious speech capable of being truly sublime." (Wuellner 2002) Otherwise, we confront the full brunt of the effects of the sublime 'in default': dehumanization.

Future Directions

It is in the face of this dehumanization that the rhetorical critic finds her/his main 'raison d'être'. And it is to this final aspect, the ethical obligations that the sublime imposes upon us as rhetorical critics, that we must turn to consider how a rhetoric of the sublime commits us, as both diagnosticians and therapists, to the consequences of its revelations. The sublime demands that we, as critics, become

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stewards of the integration and diversity that lies at the heart of all communication. The sublime reveals to us and demands our recognition of the multiplicity of levels and components of language and communication, but also their integration not only within and among themselves, but within the entire cosmic and nature world in which communication is shaped and performs its creative activity. It is not our task only to diagnose and understand the factors that determine our own work as rhetoricians and scholars and limit our efforts and effects. Instead, the rhetoric of the sublime commits us to act as therapists committed to the "challenge of balancing the diversities, pluralities of 'identities' in a global culture – politically, economically, ecologically, culturally, as well as spiritually..." (Wuellner 2002) Here we begin to see the potential of the power of an ethics arising from within a rhetorics grounded in the creation-ing and harmonizing experiences of the sublime. While it may not be the first effort to ground rhetorics in ethics, it represents a potentially significant contribution to the perennial effort to fuse the two together.

The sublime, now returned to rhetoric (or, better: restored to its rightful place at the heart of rhetoric), provides us with the clarity we have been missing. It helps us to "bring to awareness and into focus how the spiritual is working in the physical, i.e., in our context in the formation of speech as part of human language." As students of rhetoric, we are aware of the complexity of the relationship of institutional, cultural and technological developments that threaten to pervert the power of the sublime, that threaten to re-introduce a 'rhetoric restrained'. In the face of increasing globalization and both its benefits and detriments, the triadic

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relationship of power, rhetoric, and the sublime faces the challenge of succumbing to, and therefore reinforcing the trend toward polarization, isolation, cultural hegemony and monopolization. But it also holds within it the key to restore harmonization and balance, to bring us as rhetorical critics to a point wherein we transform ourselves into stewards of the divine/human mysteries of communication and communion through their intrinsic sublime power(s).

Through the sublime, we find the power of synthesis and organic wholeness in the face of fragmentation (of cultures, of the Self), *harmonia* and communion (natural and personal) in the face of polarization and dehumanization. The theoretical and practical shift of a rhetoric of power as a rhetoric of the sublime gives an organic *harmonia* to communication, and introduces ethics into rhetoric's (better: communication's) very foundations. Indeed, it is through the sublime that we begin to see a profound truth: It is not just that "all religions are rhetorical", which may be true, and is one of Kennedy's insights that has become so important to our discipline. Rather, there is something more, much more. It is the realization that *all rhetoric is religious*. Better: *spiritual*.

What Wuellner has effectively done is to signal the transformation of rhetoric away from the habits of a rhetoric restrained as so often experienced in our abstractions, our formalisms, our historical reconstructions. He has turned rhetoric away from these habits and towards a rhetorics of unbounded transformation and communion. His reflections upon the sublime describe how "perfection," as a by-product of transformation, along with communion as the goal of every rhetorical encounter, makes its presence felt on every level of human(e) communication.

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The sublime helps us to see, theoretically and practically, the ways in which rhetoric is something *more*, something *else* than what we have for the last decade been doing under the guise of “rhetorical criticism”. Three areas of exploration strike me immediately: First, it may be of value to explore further the connections between the rhetoric of power as a critical rhetoric of inquiry and the rhetoric of power as power of the sublime. Here is where a turn toward the symphonic, symbiotic and museful dimensions of materio-symbolic activity may be a useful approach to the question of the direction, purposes of these methods and the promises they may bring to our discipline. On the other hand, the sublime as conceived by Wuellner may also help us understand and recognize the extremes to which, and the limitations of a critical rhetoric of inquiry and a rhetoric of power. A challenge to us as rhetorical stewards of the sublime, no longer just analysts or historians of rhetoric, and it is up to us to take up that challenge to move beyond our current borders and boundaries.

Secondly, it appears to me that much can be gained from an exploration into the ramifications of one of the most significant aspects of Wuellner's efforts here: the return of *rhetoric* to discussions of the sublime. Recent explorations by Lacan, Foucault, Bataille, earlier reflections by Sade and Nietzsche, all seek to break out the limits of the sublime set by discussions of aesthetics. An emphasis upon the ‘civic’ and ‘practical’ that rhetoric brings may help to continue this exploration. It is far beyond my ability and the scope of this introduction to venture much further than a suggestive direction for further invention of this topic. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the return of rhetoric into the arena of the sublime represents the return of a

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focus upon the full-bodied encounter with it, as opposed to the arcane, anemic and incredibly dense abstract prose that passes for philosophical and aesthetic reflection upon the sublime.

Finally, if all religions are rhetorical and all rhetoric is religious, then the sublime has many things to teach rhetoric: the call for synthesis and wholeness in the face of specialization and compartmentalization; the reminder all rhetoric seeks communion, and not just communication; the recognition that language is both esoteric *and* exoteric, both human and divine, and particularly, *transformative*.

If this is so, then we *biblical* scholars of rhetoric have an important contribution to make to the field of rhetoric. We are no longer the poorer cousins of the discipline, the relative newcomers to the field. What Wuellner has shown us is that as scholars of religion, we are at rhetoric's very heart and center, bringing to the field the revelation of the 'black hole' around which it has circled, but whose nature it has yet to discover.

It also means that we, as *rhetorical* critics of the bible, have an important contribution to discussion about the sublime: that it is beyond mere art, aesthetic and philosophical commentary and reflection, but instead infuses itself through all aspects of life and the cosmos. The rhetorical sublime speaks of criticism, stewardship and commitment and practice, not commentary and abstraction and reflection. We scholars of rhetoric can and should reenter the discussion on-going among aestheticians and philosophers and remind them not only of the origins of the sublime in rhetoric, but of the implications of its full-bodied domain of action and effect upon an increasingly irrelevant discipline of aesthetics.

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In both cases, we students of biblical rhetoric find ourselves in a unique position, in the middle of an important and revolutionary re-discovery and re-invention of the sublime that has the potential to transform not only our methods of rhetorical analysis and criticism, nor even our discipline of biblical study and interpretation, but can also reach beyond rhetorical criticism itself and to the humanities as a whole.

By returning to its divine, but more importantly *rhetorical* roots (which, as Wuellner reminds us, are integral and organic), the sublime can be talked about, critiqued, sought after in ways regarding what I have termed the 'civic life' of thought/performance. No longer the purview of artists and philosophers, but of nature, marriage, discourse, Scripture, etc., a rhetorical approach to the sublime allows us to explore the power of the sublime in all its manifestations and in all areas of life. It allows us who are rhetorical critics an opportunity to participate in discussions regarding the sublime, to analyze and critique efforts at theorizing about it, performing it, and experiencing it. Most importantly, for the purposes of this conference (and its future), the return of the sublime to rhetoric reminds us of the *goal* of our work as critics of the bible – not just the study of history, not just analysis of its rhetoric, not just the effort to discern its interpretation and meaning, but the bringing forth of the *healing* of the divine.