The Feminine Sublime:
A Psychoanalytic Reading of Anne Carson’s
Decreation

Advisor: Dr. Aaron Deveson
Advisee: Pei-ju Wu

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中文摘要

本文企圖探討安·卡森在《解創造》中所呈現的崇高概念。透過拉岡式精神分析的閱讀，筆者張安·卡森在本書中帶領了讀者看見了康德式崇高的幻想(fantasy)、穿越了此幻想而最終建立以自我消亡為方的陰性崇高。本論文分為五章。序論簡短介紹卡森的寫作生涯及《解創造》的內容。第一章仔細探討崇高概念的歷史及卡森如何在〈泡沫〉一文中結合不同的崇高概念而組成一主要觀點：自我消亡。第二章試圖以拉岡式的精神分析閱讀組詩〈崇高們〉。在筆者〈崇高焉〉的閱讀中，莫妮卡·維緹對所有事物的欲望展現了獲得康德式崇高之后的後果：康德式主體受控於超我道德律法。卡森在〈康德對莫妮卡·維緹的問題〉中描繪了在康德觀看下的崇高物。在此詩的結構中，詩行的轉變展現了穿越康德崇高幻想的可能性，最後詩中也指出虛構的康德終於了解到維緹並不是一個他原本所認知的崇高物。第三章筆者試圖藉著拉岡性分化的公式檢視在〈我的妻子〉中作為「全無」的陰性主體：她不僅是一個在陽具控制下的康德崇高主體，也是一個大他者快感(the Other jouissance)的主體。在〈解創造〉一文中，筆者認為書寫神靈經驗中的大他者至爽快感將帶來自我的消解，是一個試圖邁向真實界界線中由死亡驅力帶來的致命行為。除了潛在的自我消亡，死亡駭力也指向了象徵界的重新創造，呼應了《解創造》的核心意義：「解放我們心內的活物」。此章以〈諾斯底主義 I 〉作結，此詩展現解創造的自我消亡過程是一個自我質疑及掙扎的旅程，而這觀點在陰性崇高論述中從未被提及。結論重申以精神分析閱讀《解創造》可以看見卡森企圖重新詮釋崇高的概念，同時也帶給了陰性崇高另一個新的觀點。

關鍵字

安·卡森、《解創造》、崇高、精神分析、幻想、超我、觀看、大他者快感
Abstract

This thesis aims to explore Anne Carson’s notion of the Sublime in *Decreation*. Reading the book through a psychoanalytical lens, I would like to argue that Carson leads us to see the fantasy of Kantian Sublime, to traverse the fantasy and ultimately to establish the feminine Sublime as the annihilation of the self. The thesis consists of five chapters. The introduction provides a brief description of Carson’s publishing career and the content of *Decreation*. The goal of the first chapter is to explore the history of the Sublime scholarship and to examine how Carson, in the essay “Foam,” combines different notions of the Sublime into one main concept: the self-annihilation. Chapter Two analyzes the suite of poems “Sublimes” on the basis of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In my reading of “Ode to the Sublime,” Monica Vitti’s desire for everything demonstrates the aftermath of acquiring the experience of the Kantian Sublime: the Kantian subject is under the control of superegoic moral law. Carson portrays Vitti as a Sublime object in Kant’s gaze in the poem “Kant’s Question about Monica Vitti.” In the structure of the poem, the shift of lines indicates the possibility of traversing the fantasy of the Kantian Sublime, as the fictional Kant realizes that Vitti as the Sublime object is not what he has been led to believe. In the third chapter, by resorting to Lacan’s formulas of sexuation, I attempt to examine the presence of the feminine subject as “not-all:” she is not only the subject of Kantian Sublime under the category of the phallus but also the subject of the Other jouissance. In the essay “Decreation,” the act of writing the ecstatic experience of the Other jouissance in relation to God brings the dissolution of the self, a fatal destruction of the subject caused by the death drive in an attempt to reach the real. In addition to the potential destruction, the death drive also points to the recreation in the symbolic
order, echoing the title of the book “Decreation:” “to undo the creature in us” (167). This chapter ends with the poem “Gnosticism I,” which shows the process of decreation as a journey of self-questioning and self-struggling. This painful experience adds a new perspective to the discourse of the feminine Sublime. The conclusion reiterates that the psychoanalytic reading of Decreation allows us to see how Carson reinterprets the notion of the Sublime and brings a new perspective in discourse of the feminine Sublime.

Keywords

Anne Carson, Decreation, the Sublime, psychoanalysis, fantasy, superego, gaze, the Other jouissance
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Introduction

Anne Carson has become a figure of such internationally established renown, “inciting both envy and admiration” in the world of contemporary poetry (Merkin 1), that it is possible to forget that it was only after until Carson published her fifth book, the award-winning *Autobiography of Red* (1998), that she received anything resembling widespread critical attention. This was the book that arrived plastered with plaudits from such eminences as Susan Sontag, Michael Ondaatje, Alice Munro, and the canon-maker himself, Harold Bloom, who recommended Carson as “a disciplined version of Gertrude Stein” (Merkin 1). Much of the excitement around her work may be thought to have something to do with her special relationship with literary and cultural history. Over the course of a 25-year publishing career described by one prominent critic as “unclassifiable” and “genre-defying” (Burt 2), Anne Carson has produced essays, fiction, non-fiction and prose poetry alongside more conventional examples of “poetry.” Ian Rae argues that her ability to blur conventional generic boundaries puts her in long literary tradition of poets turning into novelists in Canada, her home country (3). If blending of genres is her signature form of expression, another recurrent motif is the classical or historical frame of reference. Carson’s deep interest in and allusions to ancient Greek literature strongly recall H.D’s use of various characters borrowed from mythology. We can also find Sylvia Plath’s sharp tone and Robert Lowell’s confessional voice in the way Carson conveys her sentiment through autobiographical stories with vivid images.

*Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* is a particularly masterful blurring and subversion of literary forms, combing as it does biographical stories told partly through her mother, an essay subtitled “A Praise of Sleep” and discoursing on
Virginia Woolf and Homer, and the use of guns. To a great extent, that is prefigured in the book’s epigraph—“I love a poetical kinde of a march, by friskes, skips and jumps” which is Montaigne in Florio’s 1633 translation. The book explores various issues in different genres yet with one major theme emerging as a paradoxical center—namely, the inherently Sublime theme of her decentered creation of the self. The title of the volume comes from a French philosopher Simone Weil, who describes it as “to undo the creature in us.” *Decreation* is a collection imagined as the redefining writing in different genres, including lyric pomes, four essays, an opera libretto, a screenplay, an oratorio (a narrative on a religious theme), and a “shot list,” basically des/constructing its title and subtitle at the same time. The sense of decentererness permeates in her four essays with a contrasting perspective on the Sublime in each as well as in poems that exemplify her own discourses of the Sublime. For instance, the essay titled “Foam (Essay with Rhapsody): On the Sublime” precedes two groups of poems “Sublimes” and “Gnosticisms.” From a structural point of view, the book, like the self to which it is intimately related, is thoroughly decentered.

When it comes to the theme of the Sublime, James Pollock argues that “Carson has always been a writer in the Romantic tradition of the Sublime,” even if Carson’s poetic style has been regarded as avant-garde (1). “With the soul of a Romantic,” he writes, Carson manifests “the sublime annihilation or decreation of the self” in a metaphor of the sun (2). Pollock points to the eighteenth-century roots of the sublime experience of nature dealt with in Carson’s third essay “Totality: The Colour of Eclipse” while insisting that the overriding concern of the book with a rhetoric of self-annihilation makes an implicit reference to Kant’s concept of thing-in-itself. While Pollock places this book in the central dimension of the Sublime, other critics
have pointed out that Carson’s particular gendered perspective on this philosophical material deserves special consideration. Dan Disney avers that Carson subverts the traditional/masculine Sublime experience by means of recuperation of the feminine Sublime as part of a fairly radical form of self-disembodiment (25-27). He further proposes the idea of self-as-other should be understood as being crucial to an understanding of this book, as Carson obscures the boundary between self and reality through “self-erasure,” and “a form of perhaps supra-sensible Platonic reality may be apprehended” (27). The discussion on Carson’s representation of the Sublime experience reflects the long history of the Sublime scholarship. And yet the discussion of her idea about the Sublime will not be completed without a properly fleshed-out account of its psychoanalytic dimensions. Carson’s critics seem to have willfully avoided confronting the extent to which Lacanian psychoanalytic examinations of the Sublime have a bearing on Carson’s text.

Carson’s critics also fail to include the suite of poems “Sublime” as part of their reading of Carson’s feminine Sublime. In addition to the central idea of the self-annihilation that her critics have noticed, what these critics ignore is Carson’s attempt to challenge the Kantian Sublime in her search of the feminine Sublime. These interpretive problems ask for a re-consideration of Carson’s reading of the history of the Sublime and indicate that there is a need to re-interpret Decreation from different analytic perspective. In some of the poems in “Sublimes,” Carson explores the experience of the Kantian Sublime, and presents Monica Vitti, an Italian actress, as the subject who “embodies the Sublime” (Aitken 21). Drawing on three movies featuring Vitti, Carson portrays the Vitti’s feelings of isolation and mental condition in the light of the Kantian Sublime. The Lacanian psychoanalytical approach allows us to unveil the cause of her action and desire after her acquisition of the feeling of
the Kantian Sublime. Moreover, Vitti is presented not only as a Sublime subject but also as a Sublime object in the gaze of Kant. In contrast to the previous discourse of the Sublime, which mainly deals with the subjective and internal feelings, Lacan emphasizes the status of object in the experience of the Sublime, which sheds light on the relationship between Vitti as a Sublime object and Kant as a Sublime subject in “Kant’s Question about Monica Vitti.” Taking the psychoanalytic approach also allows us to read the relationship between the self-annihilation and the ecstatic condition in the encounter with God in the essay “Decreation,” as critics also fail to adequately discuss this relationship and only focus on the representation of the self-annihilation. Through a psychoanalytical lens, this thesis intends to explore a new critical reading of Carson’s view on the notion of the Sublime.

This thesis consists of three chapters. In Chapter one, “A Brief History of the Sublime Scholarship,” I will first introduce the history of the Sublime, the discourse of the feminine Sublime and how Carson plays off the notion of the conventional Sublime and adopts the notion of self-annihilation in the experience of the feminine Sublime in the essay “Foam.” The history of the Sublime begins with Dionysius Longinus’ *On the Sublime*. Around the first century AD, Longinus writes the first treatise on the Sublime experience with the emphasis on the effect of speech upon people’s mind. In the eighteenth century, Burke’s *Enquiry* plays a role of the turning point in the theorization of the Sublime, for he defines that the Sublime comes from terror and threat and is capable of arousing the feeling of pain. Burke’s focus on the psychological aspect of the spectator has great influence on Kant’s work, yet what distinguishes Kant from Burke is Kant’s theorization of the faculty of the mind. The experience of the Kantian Sublime arises from the triumph of reason over imagination, for imagination fails to establish a form of an object in our mind; therefore, the object
of the Kantian Sublime is formless. The rationality inherent in the Kantian Sublime is often characterized with masculine quality, whereas the beautiful is associated with the feminine. The gendered characterization continues in the discourse of the Romantic Sublime. Writing in the wake of Kant, the Romantic poets strive to reinstate the importance of imagination and stress the failure of language in the feelings of the Sublime. The unrepresentable presence in the experience of the Sublime is Lyotard’s main contention in his works. The indeterminate nature of the postmodern Sublime distinguishes itself from the Kantian Sublime, which is submitted to faculty of reason. Despite being inarticulable, language is the best way to put forward the postmodern Sublime, for words exists before the mind. The association with language in the postmodern Sublime demonstrates the essential relationship between the Sublime object and language in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan proposes that sublimation is achieved by the elevation of an object to the place of the Thing, the replacement of the ever-lost das Ding. The Sublimity of the elevated object is often described as inhuman or horrifying, as in the example of a lady in the poetry of courtly love. Lacan’s interpretation of Antigone explicates the Sublime effect of Antigone’s splendor, which points to the inaccessible dimension of the real, a place beyond pleasure principle. The attempt to reach das Ding as the kernel of the real is forbidden by the superego. Superego is considered to be the birthplace of the experience of the Kantian Sublime, invoked by the destructive power of nature “within me” (Zupančič 154-56). Some feminists from 1970s onward question Kant’s logic behind this rational subject, while others propose a relationship of intersubjectivity or even annihilation of the self in the experience of the feminine Sublime. In the essay “Foam,” Carson leads us to navigate the history of the Sublime and asserts that the experience of the Sublime brings self-annihilation, bearing the traces of the discourse of the
feminine Sublime.

In Chapter Two, “The Fantasy of the Kantian Sublime in ‘Sublimes,’ ” I will discuss the formation of the fantasy of and the traversing of the Kantian Sublime with the poems of “Sublimes” through a psychoanalytical lens. In “Ode to the Sublime by Monica Vitti,” Vitti is presented as neurotic patient who wants everything, which tortures her with the alternation between pleasure and pain. The mixed feeling inside her is jouissance, which she desperately desires so much that she has to go to “a clinic for people who want everything” (Carson 66). While desiring for everything, she also fights with it with a feeling of “undaunted,” and this undauntedness is presented in another poem entitled “And Reason Remains Undaunted.” This poem mainly deals with the supremacy of reason over nature, and reason remains undaunted in front of the force of nature. This undauntedness points to the courage against nature, namely, in Kant’s terms, the feeling of respect. Zupančič argues that, from a Lacanaian psychoanalytical perspective, the feeling of respect is associated with the superegoic moral law that watches and speaks to us (146). Zupančič’s elaboration on the logic and superego and the Kantian Sublime sheds light on Vitti’s desire and resistance against everything as the Sublime. In the experience of the Sublime, Vitti acquires jouissance, a result of the deadly attempt to transgress the real. The function of superego is to prohibit such an attempt, which paradoxically strengthens the desire of jouissance. The logic behind the Kantian Sublime is akin to the mechanism of the superego—the subject is protected from the immediate danger. The nature of the Kantian Sublime points to the structure of fantasy, and the Kantian subject is under the control of the superegoic moral law. Vitti is commanded by the superego to enjoy everything. In addition to being depicted as a subject of the Kantian Sublime, Viiti becomes a Sublime object under Kant’s gaze in the poem “Kant’s Question.” With
her question of the gaze, Vitti challenges Kant’s gaze and establishes her own existence. In the later part of the poem, the shift of line order indicates the switch of perspective, which leads Kant to discover his dissatisfaction of his gaze and the possibility of traversing the fantasy. The last line, “off into this more difficult dawn,” suggests that both Vitti and Kant walks into the daylight together and traverses the fantasy of the Kantian Sublime.

In the last chapter, “The Feminine Subject and the Feminine Sublime,” I will investigate the trace of the feminine Sublime in the vein of Lacan’s formulas of sexuation. The poem, “Mia Moglie,” presents the feminine subject as “not all” with the phallic jouissance and the Other jouissance. In the intriguing structure of the poem, the unrhymed couplets shows Vitti as subject of the Kantian Sublime, succumbing to the moral superegoic moral law, as well as the barred woman chasing the object a in the hope of finding the primary wholeness; the presentation of the italicized lines creates an effect of rejecting the presence of the Kantian Sublime by singling out each word from lines of Sappho’s “Fragment 31.” The poem, “Fragment 31,” portrays the subject of the Other jouissance in a condition of ecstasy, in which she is thrown outside the center of the self, and the feminine subject experience a status of “poverty” of words, a sign of standing outside the symbolic order (162). Adopting the theme of the decentered self in “Fragment 31,” Carson establishes a counterposition against the masculine/Kantian Sublime. The experience of self-erasure in “Mia Moglie” and “Fragment 31” bears the traces of the self-annihilation in the discourse of the feminine Sublime. The theme of the self-annihilation continues to be the main focus in the essay “Decreation,” which presents Carson’s attempt of capturing the feminine subjects’ inarticulable experiences with God. In the relationship with God, the feminine subjects experience the Other jouissance, a condition of ecstasy. The act of
writing the experience of the Other jouissance brings the annihilation of the self, since the attempt to the reach the Other jouissance in the dimension of the real results in the threat of the death drive. Destruction is not the only function of death drive, and it also means to create out of nothing. The logic of death drive echoes the title of the book “Decreation.” “to undo the creature in us” (167). Citing Sahppho’s “kletic” hymn, Carson compares the process of decreating the self to that of the invocation of God (178). The process of “decreation” begins with a depressing struggle and ends with God’s arrival that brings inspiration to writers. For writers who summon Divine Being, it’s hard to tell God’s arrival, because inspiration given by God flows too quickly through the mind. In the moment of inspiration, the self is annihilated in the process of “decreation.” The poem “Gnosticism I” is one of Carson’s attempts to describe the moment of “decreation,” and it demonstrates that the annihilation of the self as the feminine Sublime is the journey of self-questioning and self-struggling.
Chapter One
A Brief History of the Sublime Scholarship

I. A Brief History of the Sublime

- Longinus’ *On the Sublime*

It’s widely believed that, around the first century AD, the Greek critic Dionysius Longinus initiated the first theoretical discussion of the Sublime in *Peri Hupsos* or *On the Sublime*. Emphasizing the rhetorical concept of writing and speech, the treatise argues that the Sublime literature or political speech aims at persuading people with the power of language (Shaw 12). As a state of feeling, the Sublime somehow eludes definition, yet its great effect is clearly stated in the book: it produces a feeling of ecstasy or transport in the hearers. The influence of the Sublime is so powerful and irresistible that every hearer has to surrender, for it shatters and overwhelms everything “like a thunderbolt, and at once displays the power of the orator in all its plenitude” (Longinus 43). Immediately intoxicated and ravished on hearing an oration, the audience is captivated rather than given access to any reason or logic. For Longinus, the audience’s minds are hit by a Sublime stoke, when the Sublime dwells in the highest point of a giant flow, and “as mad flames leap / Wild-wasting from hill unto hill in the folds of a forest deep” (Longinus 65). Nevertheless, Longinus’ admirations for grandeur and human passions do not mean a restoration of “aesthetic primitivism” (Shaw 15). Geniuses or great minds are not wild but noble, cultivated, and “free from low and ignoble thoughts” (Longinus 61). Sublimity in noble minds occurs as a refined and enlightened rhetorical power to the full extent of what audience can feel. Thus, the enthralling effect of the Sublime is a result of a harmonious language, which is instilled by nature in man and tempts the soul itself.
rather than the hearing (Longinus 143). The harmony of language allures and prompts the audience to forget themselves in the encounter with the elevated emotion and for that moment they are transported to an agreeable state: they are so pleased that there is no need to question what is generally admitted in the speech. For Longinus, the mastery over minds seems to be a consensus. Yet, this unbalanced relationship between an orator and an audience shows the nature of domination and a kind of involuntary violence in Longinus’s Sublime when hearers are carried along unconsciously (Ashifield and de Bolla, 178). The Longinian Sublime is undoubtedly a discourse of power, a power that strives for an unifying effect achieved by accumulation of words.

This powerful feeling that takes over listeners’ senses is beyond description and, according to Longinus, unteachable, since “Sublimity is the echo of a great soul” (61). Only geniuses or great minds can give an electric shock with rhetorical excellence, creating intensified effect of sublimity. It would appear that the Sublime is a product of nature. Yet, as Longinus argues, “nature is the original and vital underlying principle in all cases, but system [of writing] can define limits and fitting seasons, and can also contribute the safest rules for use and practice” (45). Longinus describes many devices that could be employed to induce the Sublime, including hyperbole, comparison, similes, and metaphor (Shaw 14). While in thrall to these linguistic devices, hearers may be naturally stirred up to a state of awe, rapture, elevation and other Sublime feelings. Also as a kind of art, the verbal power channeled from human speech helps contour nature where hearers’ feelings arise. It is in this debate on the relationship between nature and art that Longinus differs from Horace(65-68 BCE), a critic and a poet, and Longinus wrote his treatise as a response to that poet’s Art Poetica. For Horace, the rules of “decorum” must keep a tight rein
on great thoughts either from the talented or the untalented, and art is “a systematic knowledge of theory and technique” (Leitch 122) The difference between Longinus and Horace lies in the fact that the former attempts to capture the state of feeling responding to art, while the latter emphasizes the formality of it. However, there is one idea on which Longinus agrees with Horace: the unity in the arts, which is equivalent to composition as in one of the sources of the Sublime. The importance of composition lies in its integration of the other four as a whole, for Longinus indicates: “sublimity is . . . a contribution made by a multitude (Longinus 147). A classist at heart, Longinus equates the Sublime with a harmonious unity, and carries this idea throughout this book, especially in his reading of Homer and Sappho. Yet, in order to put his Sublime style into effect, Longinus explicitly conflates Homer’s lines from different chapters and interprets Sappho’s poems as a representation of harmony in spite of apparent disparity (Auerbach 225-26, Freeman, 14). The experience of fragmentation in Sappho’s poems is one of Carson’s attempts to reinstate in Decreation as a part of her reconsideration of Longinus’ view on sublimity and Sappho.

- **Edmund Burke on the Sublime and the Beautiful**

  Longinus’s emphasis on the effect of intensity on people’s minds and the idea of grandeur in the Sublime experience comes to be a source of the following theorizations of the Sublime. In the eighteenth century, a turning point of the discussion on the Sublime appears with the Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, with the purpose of clarifying the distinction between the Sublime and the beautiful. As a follower of empiricism, Burke contends that evidence of “senses” is the center of our perception...
of the world (14). “All the natural powers in man,” Burke suggests in the newly added introduction in the fourth edition, “which I know, that are conversant about external objects, are the Senses; the Imagination; the Judgment. And first with regard to the senses” (14). The insistence on the senses establishes the trajectory in Burke’s analysis, and his empiricist argument of the treatise cuts off the association with the divinity, which is characteristic of the source of Longinian Sublime (Shaw 49). Although based on the philosophy of empiricism, Burke’s Enquiry still shows traces of Longinus’s On the Sublime. Burke compares the intensified effect of “what Longinus has observed of glorying and sense of inward greatness” to a representation of human beings’ competition and ambition, for readers is filled with a sense the self-triumph when reading or hearing passages from great poets and orators (Burke 50).

Moreover, Burke further associates the Sublime with terror. The Sublime, for Burke, is the intensest and most passionate emotion that the mind is able to feel (39). The feeling induced by magnificence and the Sublime in nature is astonishment, “a state of soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (Burke 57). Burke gives the first rank to astonishment in the effect of the Sublime, superior to admiration, reverence and respect. The source of the Sublime is whatever is terrible, cable of exciting the ideas of pain and danger, or functions in a way similar to terror (Burke 39). Burke strongly believes that the ideas of pain resulting from fatigue, suffering, or anxiety are more powerful than those that operate through pleasure. Apart from fear or terror, no other feelings can snatch away the ability to reason or act from the mind, since terror or fear itself is the fear of death or pain (Burke 57). Thus, the Sublime involves the preservation of the self and is naturally the fiercest of all feelings (Burke 38). Yet, a pleasurable experience might still be a result of the encounter with pain or danger. When danger or pain draws too near, they
produce pure terror instead of any form of delight; yet, at a certain distance, they may be delightful with some modification (Burke 40). As long as actual danger is kept within a certain distance from the self, a sense of delight may still be possible to be acquired in the Sublime terror. Another source of the Sublime is infinity, which tends to “fill the mind with sort of delightful horror” (Burke 73). As Burke asserts, this is the most genuine effect of the Sublime. Human beings cannot perceive anything infinite with actual eyes, yet the failure of perception somehow produces the same effect of infinity. Our imagination meets no boundary of any definite number or limit, if a large object continues to expand (Burke 73). Our pleasure derived from this experience also grows along with the encounter with infinity, since danger does not press near the self while dilating somewhere beyond perception. This truest test of the Sublime, Burke indicates, also shows how human beings are deceived visually to take delight in the infinity (Burke 73).

The delight of the Sublime is not to be confused with the pleasure in the beautiful. For Burke, the beautiful is a social quality, which gives out a sense of joy and pleasure when being watched (Burke 42). We like to be near or even be bonded with beautiful things, for they have sentiments of tenderness. Unlike the Sublime terror with certain pressing distance, the beautiful inspires people to enter willingly into a relation with them. Burke specifies unthreatening characteristics of the beautiful in comparison with those of the Sublime. Beautiful objects are comparatively small, smooth, polished, crooked, light, and delicate, whereas the Sublime ones should be vast in size, rugged, negligent, straight, gloomy, and solid (Burke 123). They are of stark contrast in their nature; one is based on terror and pain and the other on pleasure. Burke’s meditations on this pair are frequently associated with the norm of masculine and feminine. Delicacy and weakness is at their highest in
females, as Burke claims that blushing and modesty is less powerful and much more amiable (109). Males are not amiable because of such virtues as courage and wisdom that cause admiration and ultimately produce terror (Burke 110). Burke first distinguishes the beautiful from the Sublime with respect to associating these with the feminine and the masculine in aesthetic expression, and this gender system can be found in Kant’s work that sees the male as the rational subject and the female as nature.

- **Kant on the Sublime and the Beautiful**

In the “Analytic of the Sublime,” the German Idealist philosopher Immanuel Kant addresses the conceptual problems of the Sublime, and his philosophical treatment with the Sublime experience forms the centerpiece of his *Critique of Judgment*, bridging and summing up the a trilogy of work including the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical reason*. The affinity with Burke’s enquiry into the comparison between the Sublime and the beautiful can be found in the “Analytic of the Sublime,” yet what distinguishes Kant from Burke and other Sublime scholars is that Kant conceives the analysis of the Sublime as connected with the faculty of understanding and reason. Understanding is a faculty of establishing concepts or rules. “[T]hrough the understanding’s organization of sensible intuitions that we are able to distinguish particular objects and events, and…relate these to one another on the basis of universally valid causal laws” (Crowther 30). Reason functions as knowledge that determines whether an object and its concepts conform to the formal condition of truth. The specific function of reason “is to formulate ‘principles,’ that are concepts which seek to systematize and unify other sets of concepts” (Crowther 31). While we are provided with the objective framework of our
knowledge of the world by understanding, reason demands the highest degree of systemization and unity.

Following Burke’s distinction between the Sublime and the beautiful, Kant further points out that the significant difference between the beautiful and the Sublime lies in the form of object and the subject’s psychological reaction. When people find an object beautiful, for Kant, its form is within boundaries and limits of representation; on the other hand, there is no form or boundary in the Sublime object (Critique of Judgment 101-2). The formless object of the Kantian Sublime follows Burke’s notion of the infinity as a source of Sublimity. For Kant, the Sublime experience occurs when the scale of space and time that exceeds our ability to think, and results in a negative pleasure, implying an “outrage to our powers of comprehension” (Shaw 78). The mind is alternately attracted and repelled when faced with the Sublime objects, while it is simply attracted to beautiful ones. The beautiful “carries with it a feeling of the furtherance of life,” whereas the Sublime is generated by a blockage of vital power followed by a more powerful leakage (Critique of Judgment 102). The fact that beautiful objects have a straightforward appeal to our mind lies in the purposiveness in its form, “pre-adapted to our Judgment” (Kant 103). In other words, the pleasure we find in the beautiful is brought about by an object’s form, and then its beautiful form leads to a agreement of cognitive faculties based on “the reflective judgment’s a priori principle of natural finality” (Critique of Judgment 82). In contrast, a formless Sublime object contravenes the purpose of our judgment and violently disturbs the faculty of imagination (Critique of Judgment 103). The more violent an object does to the imagination, the more Sublime it is. The real Sublime, as Kant continues, is not contained in any sensible form but can only be found in the mind. It is the inadequacy of form unfit for reason that arouses the
feeling of the Sublime (Critique of Judgment 103). The idea of determining sublimity is already in the mind so that a feeling of the Sublime can be incited. Thus, compared with the beautiful, the Sublime feeling is much more subjective, since it is “merely in ourselves and in our attitude of thought which introduces sublimity into the presentation of nature” (Critique of Judgment 104). When the rules of judgment are applied to a Sublime object, “a movement” stirs in the mind, causing disturbance to the judgment (Critique of Judgment 105). A placid contemplation, however, is maintained by the presupposition of taste in the face of a beautiful object. For Kant, the Sublime quality is unrepresentable and beyond description and the exceeding magnitude points to a further investigation of its nature.

Kant distinguishes two different types of the Sublime experience, which he terms as the mathematical and the dynamical Sublime. In the mathematical Sublime, the object is of spatial and temporal magnitude that exceeds our sensible faculty; thus imagination is unable to estimate it. With the dynamical Sublime, a sense of fear is incited when the subject confronts the powerful and mighty object. Starting his analysis by defining the Sublime as “what is great beyond all comparison,” Kant explains that mathematical sublimity is impossible to be measured by any standard outside itself. (Critique of Judgment 106). The magnitude of the Sublime object is itself alone, and, therefore, it is greater in comparison with everything else in nature. In Kant’s words, the Sublime is “only in our ideas” (Critique of Judgment 109). If everything is infinitely small compared with the Sublime, Kant’s concept of the infinity appears, for example, in an attempt to gauge the Milky Way with one’s body (Shaw 81). Its immensity might be measured, in the beginning, with the distance from the earth to the sun, yet one’s imagination will necessarily fail in the end as a result of the intervention of reason. Reason, as Kant suggests, demands for a presentation of
totality in order to estimate the form of an object (Critique of Judgment 109). In other words, the estimation of reason shows the infinitude of the universe, which ultimately leads to the vain attempt of imagination to comprehend the magnitude of a shapeless object. Between the conflict of reason and imagination arises a feeling of pain and a pleasure in the Sublime (Critique of Judgment 119-20). The act of imagination is violent to the internal sense, as it “annihilates the condition of time;” through imagination, the violence is regarded as “purposive in reference to the whole determination of the mind” (emphasis italics, Critique of Judgment 122). The feeling of pain is represented as purposive, although the Sublime as pain is simultaneously related to the faculty of aesthetical judgment (Critique of Judgment 122). Pain, “the necessary extension of imagination,” is the medium through which a pleasure can be received in the object as the Sublime (Critique of Judgment 123). It is only through displeasure that the pleasure in the Sublime object is possible.

The dynamical Sublime is associated with fear in the confrontation with the overwhelming might of nature, yet a sense of resistance is aroused against the object that excites fear. At the sight of an erupting volcano, for instance, we are inevitably attracted to it as long as we are watching it in a safe distance. The more dangerous and threatening the fearful object kept away at far distance is, the more appealing it is. Kant’s notion of safety distance apparently bears the traces of the Burkean Sublime, which is aroused when danger is kept at a distance. Similarly, in the dynamical Sublime, the self is protected from the forceful object of nature. The idea of “self-preservation” reveals human’s “superiority over nature” and independence from it under the operation of our rational faculty (Critique of Judgment 125). Human beings fear the almightiness of nature and feel comparatively small, but reason in the mind calls up courage against any possible domination of nature. Therefore, the delight of
the dynamical Sublime comes from our sense of security and the intervention of reason that Kant regards as “the destination of our faculty” (Critique of Judgment 126). A savage who shuns and fears nothing, and takes deliberate consideration and action in face of violent nature, exhibits the greatest extent of sublimity, for his mind does not yield to any form of peril. Rationality prevails over nature; thus the Kantian Sublime is within us rather in nature, which is counter to Burke’s conception of the Sublime in nature.

As often couched in sexual terms, the Kantian Sublime and the Burkean Sublime constantly both regard the beautiful as the female and the Sublime as the male. In Burke, the beautiful is of pleasing quality, which is to be found from “the mother’s fondness,” while the Sublime depends on the fear for greatness, associated with “the authority of a father” (111). The masculine quality and realm are key attributes of the Sublime, as made clear in Burke’s citing of John Milton’s Paradise Lost where the Sublime’s gloomy obscurity is “[f]ierce as ten furies; terrible as hell / And shook a deadly dart. What seemed his head / the likeness of a kingly crown had on” (Burke 59-60). Not only is it embodied by a father figure, the Sublime also celebrates the monarchs and the revolutions of kingdoms because of their magnitude and greatness of confusion (Burke 62). This kind of obscurity in the Sublime is best conveyed through poetry rather than other forms of art (Burke 61). It comes as no surprise that Burke continues a conventional distinction between “masculine intellect” and “feminine matter” (Shaw 59). The beautiful is described as an aspect of nature and excluded from the masculine artistic representation. The gendered nature of aesthetic fields remains unshaken in Kant’s Third Critique. In his account, the beautiful we experience is the result of the harmony between imagination and understanding, while the Sublime as “non-natural power, our freedom from physical
determinism,” is a product after the conflict between the imagination and the reason (Mattick 295). For Kant, the association of the Sublime with male’s intellectual creation and the beautiful with the feminine is already conceived in his earlier work *Observation on The Feelings of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, which largely draws on Burke’s work and “reworks its general themes in a less physiological engaged dereliction, that the full expression of the gendered entanglements of the two notions is realized” (Mann 25). Kant elaborates the analogical relationship between sexual difference and aesthetic feelings, and further specifies the activities involved in the Sublime that denies access to women. If a beautiful female attempts to pursue knowledge or Greek classics, such is the nobility of the Sublime, she “might as well even have a beard” (Kant, *Observation* 78). An aged woman can finally seek Sublimity as her beauty is defeated by flying times, and be educated first by her husband (Kant, *Observation* 92). The manly quality is prescriptively inherent in the Sublime, only reserved for and proper to the male. In nineteenth-century thought, gendered categorization is prominent and Kant’s explicit dichotomization of the notions of the beautiful and the Sublime is deeply entangled with the characterization and the norms of masculinity and femininity.

• The Romantic Sublime

The strong relation that Burke and Kant established between the Sublime and the beautiful is later adopted by the Romantic and Idealist male writers in the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of nineteenth century. Writing in the wake of Kant, the German Idealist poets and philosophers, F.W.J von Schelling and Friederich Schlegel, emphasize not so much the victory of reason as the failure of imagination (Shaw 90). With the limitation of imagination, writers strive to protect its importance and possibility of connecting the realm of nature with that of mind in
artistic representation. To the artist, “nature…is merely the imperfect reflection of a world that exists not outside but within him” (Simpson 228). Art, especially poetry, allows us to unite all the distinct realms of mind and nature and to grasp the concept of the Sublime. British Romantic poets such as Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats also defend the significance of imagination (Shaw 93). The relation between poetry and imagination is again the recurrent theme in British Romanticism. As Coleridge puts it, “The grandest efforts of poetry are where imagination is called forth…and creating what is again rejected; the result being what the poet wishes to impress, namely the substitution of a Sublime feeling of the unimaginable for a mere image” (qtd. in Shaw 98). At the limit of language, the poet lets his imagination run beyond the chains of meaningful words and presents the unimaginable thing with Sublime feelings. The mind is set free when language is unable to function properly, a point on which Coleridge most agrees with Kant (Shaw 113). The Sublime, for Coleridge, is a way of “elevation,” which is aroused when the mind runs into the restriction of “sense” and “understanding” (qtd.in Shaw 98). Romantic poetry provides a creative space that bridges the blocked faculties for the mind to be lifted when the failure of language coincides with it. The writing in the wake of or against the Kantian Sublime does not stop in the Romantic period but continues into the era of postmodern philosophy’s reexamination of the Kantian Sublime.

• The Postmodern Sublime

Postmodernism from the 1940s onward holds a different and skeptical attitude towards the fact that reason is a higher faculty over imagination, which has long been worshipped by the Kantian followers. Sharing the concept of the Kantian Sublime as the “formlessness,” the French theorist Jean-François Lyotard claims that postmodern
culture “remains inexplicable without the incommensurability of reality” (The Postmodern Condition 79). Lyotard argues that postmodern aesthetics “puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself,” rather than only revealing the missing content as in modern art (The Postmodern Condition 81). Postmodernism rejects the pleasure of a perfect form but seeks to uncover “a stronger sense of the unpresentable” (The Postmodern Condition 81). In “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” the impossibility of representation of a Sublime object is associated with the concept of here and now, when Lyotard comments on Barnett Baruch Newman’s first three sculptures Here I, Here II. Here III, a painting entitled Not Over There, Here, two paintings entitled Now, two others entitled Be, and an essay “The Sublime is Now.” Newman’s notion of “now” points to “the feeling that might happen: the nothingness now” (Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” 198). So what happens between “now” and the Sublime? The sense of indeterminacy threatens to kindle the Sublime, a mixture of pleasure and pain that marks impending death. This painful situation is, in Burke’s word, terror. “What is terrifying is that the It happens that does not happen, that it stops happening” (original emphasis, Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” 204). It is also linked with the privation of language and of life, and all the things in life will come to an end in a blink of an eye. “One feels that it is possible that soon nothing more will take place” (Lyotard, “Newman” 245). The Sublime feeling is evoked by the risk of losing everything, and at the same time the mind is struck with astonishment, then made inoperative. Art provides a space where the mind is kept at a distance from the immobilizing menace and “is returned to the agitated zone between life and death” (Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” 205). Standing on the boundary between artistic space and imminent nothingness, the mind feels the Sublime in artwork, especially in poetry. Siding with Burke on this genre,
Lyotard considers the arts of language in poetry to be free from the classical rule of imitation and to incite intensified feelings without being visible. The poetic force is formless, and the shocking combination of words is “the evidence of (something) happening, rather nothing, suspended privation” (Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” 205). Poets attempt to present the unrepresentable and to capture the impossibility with language. We know “something” unimaginable happens, but “what” happens exactly? The classification between the “something” and the “what” happens is the foundation of Lyotard’s theory of the event. As Simon Malpas explains, when we are able to say “what happens,” we already fill the Sublime experience or event with certain category of knowledge or discourse in mind and hence close up its possibility of changing (101). On the other hand, “‘something happens’ calls for a receptivity to the event itself” (Malpas 101). In this case, we are open to the event, as no pre-given rules will fit into the Sublime experience. This open reaction allows the event to be unrepresentable and to resist any form of representation, and it responds with openness to challenges from established modes of representation. The Sublimity “consists in the perception of an instant in which something happens to which we called to respond without knowing in advance the genre in which to respond” (Malpas 101). When a Sublime event occurs, as simple as a poem, no pre-established discourse can adequately respond to its indeterminate nature. This is the postmodern Sublime, with open judgment and the specificity of the event, which is where Lyotard is different form Kant, who, in the “Analytic of the Sublime,” “submits the Sublime to the discipline of reason, which always arrives, belatedly as it were, to pronounce its judgment” (Shaw 124).

In “After the Sublime: The State of Aesthetics,” Lyotard focuses on the relation between “matter” and “form” on the issues of the aesthetics of the Sublime.
In the long history of Western art, the idea of art has been understood in the debate between matter and form. By way of discussing Kant again, Lyotard observes that the concept of form underlies the beautiful, since form “is thought of as the act of giving a figure to material power” and is capable of synthesizing data intelligible to understanding (Lyotard, *Inhuman* 138-39). On the contrary, in the Sublime experience, matter is conceived of as “an indeterminate state of reality” and as occurrence “at the price of suspending these active powers of the mind…for at least ‘an instant’” (Lyotard, *Inhuman* 139-40). As Lyotard points out, Sublime matter is immaterial and unstable, and “does not turn towards the mind;” instead, “it turns towards a thing” (*Inhuman* 142). The thing, Lyotard argues, does not wait to be finalized and appeal to the mind. Likewise, matter of the Sublime experience does not require the mind, and it only “sits ‘before’ questioning and answer ‘outside’ them’” (Lyotard, *Inhuman* 142). The Sublime exists as unrepresentable presence to the mind, eluding the mind’s grasp. Words are the only way to put forward matter, because “[w]ords ‘say,’ sound, touch, always ‘before’ thought (*Inhuman* 142). Although being unable to be grasped in the mind, the Sublime matter is caught up in the net of language, which, in Lyotard’s view, exists before the mind. Lyotard fails to explain that what the Sublime thing really is and leaves it in an “indeterminate” status, yet its association with language shows the indispensible relationship between the Sublime object and language in Lacanian psychoanalysis.

- **Sublimation in Psychoanalysis**

Lacan engages with the concept of sublimation mainly in *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. He takes up Freud’s emphasis on social recognition in the process of sublimation, since sublimation creates socially valued objects towards which the drives are channeled (Lacan, *Ethics* 107). Central to the concept of sublimation, this
object, Lacan suggests, involve the change of value from an ordinary object to *das Ding*. Lacan’s thoughts on the dynamics between *das Ding* and sublimity start with his questions about his interpretation of Sophocles’ play *Antigone* and Melanie Klein’s case study.¹ Lacan argues that sublimation is not realized through the recovery of the mother’s body but rather achieved by the elevation of an object to “the dignity of the Thing” (Lacan, *Ethics* 118). The price of entering into the symbolic order is giving up the fantasy of unity with the mother, and hence, in order to feel the completeness again in the world of words, *das Ding* as the lost object must be relentlessly refound and must always return as something else (Lacan, *Ethics* 118). The elevated object is the replacement of *das Ding*, a thing and a lure that prompts the subject to circle around the ever-lost *das Ding*. The elevated object therefore becomes “the Thing” (Lacan, *Ethics* 119). For example, some people collect empty matchboxes apparently not for use but as a hobby, which shows the “thingness” of matchboxes (Lacan, *Ethics* 114). The collection of matchboxes is one of the simplest forms of sublimation, as Lacan suggests, involving a personal satisfaction without demanding from others (*Ethics* 114). Yet, sublimation is not a substitutive satisfaction nor replacement of signifiers. What sublimation brings is a substitution of emptiness. The question of *das Ding* as a hole in the real lies in, let us recall, the subject’s sacrifice of going into the Symbolic, and it is impossible to register *das Ding* in the

¹ The case is about a woman tortured from recurring depression and always feeling an empty space inside her that would never be filled. The walls of the woman’s house were covered with the paintings of her brother-in-law, and then the in-law sells one of the paintings, leaving an empty space on the wall. This particular vacancy triggers the attacks of depression. To fill up the empty space comes to be her way of recovery. She starts to paint a painting in imitation of her brother-in-law’s style with enthusiasm, and, as a result, her work is so surprisingly mature that the in-law refuses to be convinced. The skillful painting seems to be the thing to fill up the hole on the wall and inside her heart. The painting’s subject matter is a series of images from advanced age to “the image of her own mother at the height of her beauty” (Lacan, *Ethics* 117). For Klein, this case confirms her theory that the mother’s body is the thing to be found so as to fill the vacant space, and pinpoints the phases of sublimation. Klein places the mother’s body on the position of *das Ding* in order to illustrate the act of filling up the hole, and her intriguing account is questioned by Lacan owing to the fact that the imaginary image of the mother is rooted out upon the entry into the symbolic order (*Ethics* 106).
Symbolic. *Das Ding* is strange to the Symbolic, leaving a hole around which the symbolic system circles. This notion of *das Ding* as unpresentable void and the Thing as signifier leads us to the relation between the subject and the pleasure principle. This process of sublimation is inseparable from the formation of a sense of a distance between the object and the Thing, and in this gap the space of the drives is opened up. At this point, Lacan revisits Freud’s notion of the pleasure principle, which targets on evading unpleasure and acquiring pleasure (Evans 148). Lacan points out that the pleasure principle controls the quest for the object and forces unceasing “detours” which keeps the distance between the lost object and the subject (*Ethics* 58). In other words, it is the pleasure principle that keeps the subject circling around the void, taking the subject from one signifier to the other in order to avoid the deadly encounter with the Thing.

An archetypal case of sublimation is courtly love. In the relationship of courtly love, the Lady, the feminine object, is created to be desired and worshipped, and, in other words, elevated to the place of the Thing. Lacan cites an example of a troubadour poem by Arnaud Daniel in which a Lady commands her knight to put his mouth to her genital area as a trial of his worthiness of his love. The Lady in courtly love is described not as a real person with concrete features but as a horrifying and “inhuman partner,” and, in all the troubadour poems, the addressee seems to be the same person (Lacan, *Ethics* 149-50). Always described in the same way, “in this poetic field the feminine object is emptied of all real substance” (Lacan, *Ethics* 149). The Lady is the radical Other that incommensurably requests any form of service from her servant, putting her loyal pursuer through intolerable ordeals. This capricious and traumatic Other designates the place of *das Ding*, the Thing, where its

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2 In medieval Europe, courtly love is a convention that a knight expresses his unconsummated love for his lady, which comes to be a theme extensively employed in European literature of the time.
emptiness resists symbolization. The idealized Lady embodies the deadly void, “a machine which utters meaningless demands and at random” (Žižek, Metastases 90). How knights obediently and willingly serves her master Lady incapable of empathy can therefore be regarded as a demonstration of the narcissistic function. The ideally exalted feminine object deprived of real substance functions as a mirror on to which “the subject’s ideal is projected” (Lacan, Ethics 151). The knight finds his ideal ego, a perceptually perfect unity of the self, in the machine-like Lady. In courtly love, the Lady as the Thing is an anamorphic image, a distorted surface that reflects the idealization and exaltation of a love object. It is because of the inaccessibility of the Lady that troubadours endeavors to sing the praises of her depersonalized beauty. This beloved object of courtly love “surrounded and isolated by a barrier” (Lacan, Ethics 149) marks the nature of sublimation with her relationship with the Thing. The art of courtly love is, inevitably in this sense, circling around the cold-hearted Lady qua the Thing, the dazzlingly Sublime object with a grim smile.

Lacan’s focus on the Sublime reemerges later in the closing chapters in The Ethics of Psychoanalysis with his close reading of Antigone. Instead of looking at the antagonism between national interest and familial love, Lacan unravels the mystery of aesthetic qualities and desire through the image and story of Antigone. As Lacan suggests, Antigone has “unbearable splendor” and “a quality that both attracts us and startles us, in the sense of intimidates us; this terrible, self-willed victim disturbs us”

3 The play by Sophocles portrays the aftermath of Oedipus’s self-exile: Eteocles and Polyneices, two sons born of the incestuous relationship with his mother, kill each other in a battle for the throne of Thebes. Creon, the new ruler, issues an edict that Eteocles will be honored and sanctified by holy rites, while Polyneices will lie unburied in battle field in public shame for his act of rebellion. The lone survivors of Oedipus’s line, and Ismene, have a conflict of opinion over the burial of Polyneices. In defiance of Creon’s decree, Antigone decides to bury her bother after Ismene’s refusal of assistance for fear of death penalty. After Creon’s soldiers discover Antigone’s deed and brings her to Creon, Antigone is sent to a jail where she will commit suicide. This tragedy turns on the conflict between two value systems: the moral law supported by the Theban King and the divine law demonstrated in the love of Antigone for her deceased sibling.
(Ethics 247). Lacan observes that the Antigone’s moving beauty is “something that causes the Chorus to lose its head, as it tells us itself, makes the just appear unjust, and makes the Chorus transgress all limits, including casting aside any respect it might have for the edicts of the city” (Ethics 281). Here Lacan does not point out the sublimity of Antigone but allude to the Sublime effect of the moving side of the beauty. It is the effect of her beauty that, Lacan continues, “causes all critical judgment to vacillate, stops analysis, and plunges the different forms involved into a certain confusion or, rather, an essential blindness” (Ethics 281). What blinds the Chorus or us as readers or audience from rational thinking is Antigone’s pure desire for death that has been demonstrated from the beginning of this play. At the limit between life and death, Antigone’s fascinating beauty glows as she reveals to us the forbidden dimension, the real, which is yet forever blurry because of the radiating beauty. Beauty, Lacan, argues, is strangely and ambiguously related to desire, and, with the effect of the beauty, desire is suspended, lowered, disarmed, and even stopped (Ethics 238). The function of the beautiful is to make desire safer through the structure of fantasy. The beautiful involves an inaccessible dimension, das Ding, which is kept away from the subject. In other words, beauty serves as the last frontier of das Ding in relation to desire.

The play, for Lacan, reveals Antigone’s insistence on the irreplaceability of her brother, Polyneices. For Antigone, there is only one Polyneices, Lacan argues, “the ineffaceable character” occupying a position securely in the signifying chain, to which she unyieldingly hold on till her death (Ethics 279). Only when Plynices’s name is registered on the tomb can his entire being be conceived in the symbolic world. It is Antigone’s belief that put her on this fatal limit zone of language, which sheds light on how exactly language weaves the longitude and latitude of one’s life.
Her beauty clings to this limit where appears the break between language and the subject, the *ex nihilo* that enables humans to fabricate signifiers, and the split between the subject of the enunciation and of the statement that allows the subject to use language. Moreover, she mistakenly situates herself in the place of the Other, on the limit of the laws of the gods (Lacan, *Ethics* 278). She leads herself towards the fatal limit she establishes with her desire, and even goes beyond the border that no mortal can cross. She refuses to sublimate her desire and insists on reaching the bitter end where only the deadly thing, *das Ding*, awaits her. Thus, Antigone becomes the Sublime object by occupying the place of *das Ding*, and her beauty is then unveiled.

Antigone’s splendor marks the dimension of the forbidden Real, where *das Ding* is inaccessible and beyond the pleasure principle. Driven by the pleasure principle, the attempt to reach *das Ding* is a transgression, which brings the painful pleasure, *jouissance*. The search of *jouissance* is deadly and points to the path of death, and the transgression of *jouissance* is prohibited by the superego that regulates the subject with the Law. The paradox lies in the fact that the more the superego prohibits, the more the subject wants the fatal enjoyment. The prohibition of the Law highlights the *jouissance* that always transgresses. With the relation between *jouissance* and superego, Lacan associates the imperative nature of superego with the Kantian categorical imperative (Evans 201). The superego is the Law of the Other that commands the subject to enjoy.

Alenka Zupančič considers the superego as the birthplace of the feeling of the Sublime, which is evoked by the destructive power of nature “within me” (154-56). The disastrous force within me is closely related to the mechanism of superego, which, Zupančič suggests, allows us to differentiate the beautiful and the Sublime through a Lacanian psychoanalytical lens. Because of its “purposiveness without purpose,” the
beautiful as “natural formation” offers us the general picture of the knowledge of nature. While the beautiful is a sense-ful form, the Sublime is a senseless form (original emphasis, Zupančič 157). The sublime is formless, emerging as “pure excess, as the eruption of an inexplicable ‘jouissance’” (Zupančič 157). The sublime, in other words, points to the dimension where “Nature enjoys,” whereas the beautiful is characterized as “Nature Knows” (original emphasis, Zupančič 157). Zupančič continues by asserting the fact that the Sublime is fascinating and captivating for the subject lies in the jouissance of the Other, which serves no real purpose. This definition further explicates the two types of the Sublime in relation to Kantian moral agency: the dynamic Sublime, brought forth by the violence of nature, displays the inexorability and mortality of Kantian moral law, while the mathematically Sublime, emphasizing spatial and temporal magnitude, reveals the aspect of the endless task inflicted on the subject of moral law. (Zupančič 157) This dimension of infinity of moral law purports the fantasy of the subject’s unceasing torture, which presents the body of the Kantian rational being as the Sublime body (Zupančič 157-8).

Zupančič asserts that watching the devastating force of nature at a safe distance gives the sense of the Sublime, which is Kant’s fundamental fantasy (158). The sense of safety also makes the subject passive and constrained by the enjoyment of the Law. Kant’s logic behind this inert rational subject also becomes a target of criticism for some feminists, who propose the feminine Sublime against the traditional Sublime.

II. The Feminine Sublime

The gendered mechanism and classification in the history of the Sublime since the mid-eighteenth century have been questioned and challenged by some feminists
from the 1970s onward, and those critics delve into questions of femininity and sublimity with various aims. The discussion on the misogynist Sublime starts with Luce Irigaray’s 1974 “Paradox a Priori.” Irigaray argues that the Kantian Sublime presents the rules of representation constructed by the male and that the relationship with nature is sacrificed because of the faculty of understanding (204). The Kantian subject emerging in the Sublime experience operates as a Euro-masculine subject, whose relationship with others is the relationship with himself, and the encounter with formidable nature ultimately leads to “a securely sovereign subject (Mann 33-34). Irigaray points out that this symmetrical difference of the masculine subject is never fully analyzed, since the subject treats nature as a mirror, upon which he only sees his reflection through reason as a replacement of imagination (210). In *The Phenomenal Woman*, Christine Battersby argues that Kant’s critical writings refuse women the Sublime which is associated with higher moral action and reveals that Kant’s theories of the Sublime is based on sexual difference (64-65). This bias predicated on sexual binaries is shown, Battersby points out, in Kant’s suggestion that women escape physical danger for her own safety — or rather for safety of the womb — in order to give birth to the human species’ next generation (65).

In “Toward a Female Sublime,” Patricia Yaeger observes that the Romantic Sublime is “a masculine mode of writing and relationship” (192), and considers the feminine Sublime—her use of this phrase is the earliest that I am aware of—as the “pre-Oedipal sublime,” which “engenders a zone where self-empowerment and intersubjective bliss entertain one another in an atmosphere free of paranoia” (205). The Romanticists as followers of Kant present, Yaeger argues, “the old-fashioned

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4 Yaeger offers a revision of the Oedipal Sublime proposed by Weiskel in “The Logic of Terror.” In this essay, through a Freudian lens, Weiskel argues that Burk’s fear of pain and Kant’s dominant faculty of reason are associated with “castration anxiety” and “Oedipus Complex” (93)
sublime of domination, the vertical Sublime which insists on aggrandizing the masculine self over others” (191). Unlike the masculine Sublime, the feminine Sublime as “the horizontal Sublime” seeks a harmonious relationship with others and “spreads itself out into multiplicity” (Yaeger 191). This horizontal feminine Sublime indicates a relationship with others in a more peaceful and respectful attitude.

The relationship of intersubjectivity in the feminine Sublime recurs in Barbara Freeman’s *The Feminine Sublime*, the first book to have attempted a thorough examination of the tradition of the masculine Sublime from Longinus, Burke and Kant from a feminist perspective. One of Freeman’s main contentions is that these male key thinkers “exclude an otherness that … is gendered as feminine” (3), and the aim of *The Feminine Sublime* is “to demonstrate the dominant ideology of misogyny that haunts canonical theories of the Sublime and to suggest another mode of envisioning it” (7). Freeman proposes that the experience of the feminine Sublime involves the subject’s position in relation to an otherness “that is excessive and unrepresentable” (3). Her use of the term “feminine” is employed not to “a specifically feminine subjectivity or mode of expression, but rather to that which calls such categories into questions” (9). Indicating a position of refusal to accept the patriarchal and masculinist system and order, the subject of the feminine Sublime from Freeman’s perspective is inevitably represented as female, Maxwell argues (9).

In her 2001 *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne*, Maxwell, unlike Freeman, proposes a gender-specific connotation of the term “feminine” and “female” by examining the feminization of the Victorian male poets and the poet’s relation to a “disfiguring sublime, imagined as an aggressive female force which feminizes the male in an act that simultaneously deprives and energizes him” (1-9). Maxwell’s
analysis of poetic feminization of male poets through poetic tradition establishes the Sublime as a feminine force, through which the male poets like Milton are impelled towards self-feminization in order to gain vision. The male poets’ compulsion to attain vision comes after “a form of disfiguration,” a sacrifice akin to a symbolic castration (Maxwell 1-2). Maxwell suggests that the disfigured and feminized male identities make poets great writers, in that the effect of feminization given by the feminine Sublime often marks an aggressive and penetrating force in poems (7). Although mainly focusing on male poets, Maxwell emphasizes that femininity is crucial for the symbolically castrated male poets and female poets who also feel “a bond of sisterly sympathy” (7). Encountering and dominated by the female force of the feminine Sublime, the male poetic subjects do undergo the rapture or pleasure (Maxwell 8). Maxwell declares that she takes more “aggressive aspects of the Sublime,” when she compares her own version of the Sublime with Patricia Yaeger’s and Anne Moller’s, the latter being “gentle domesticated or communitarian, essentially ‘nicer’ than the supposed masculine sublime”; it is closer to the notion of the feminine beautiful that Burke and Kant propose (8-9).

In addition to the feminized poetic images, female physical bodies are also a source of discussion of the experience of the Sublime. Sheila Lintott in 2003 “Sublime Hunger: A Consideration of Eating Disorder Beyond Beauty” attempts to alter the mistaken notion accepted by the public that patients with anorexia are pathologically influenced by the social standard of beauty and thinness, and Lintott argues that the desire manifested by patients suffering from an eating-disorder represents a quest for the Kantian Sublime by means of controlling their bodies through extreme dieting. By defeating the hunger for food that brings pleasure, “the eating-disordered rejects the dominance of nature over her physical self . . . The
dominance of the self over nature is the crusade of the anorectic and bulimic” (Lintott 75). For the eating-disordered who have trouble identifying herself with her body, her body is regarded as “other,” which can be overcome and dominated (Lintott 75). The will power she possessed to deny food and undergo tremendous suffering of her body manifests the triumph feeling of self-control, which is what the Kantian subject feels in negative pleasure brought by the experience of the Sublime. The case of eating disorder illustrates the end of reason as the ultimate judgment: a dying body or even death.

Taking up notion of intersubjectivity from previous feminists such as Yeager and Freeman, Joanna Zynliska in her 2001 work proposes that her version of the feminine Sublime embraces the excess confined in Burke’s and Kant’s work and it does not “capitalize the difference in order to enhance modern selfhood with its feeding institution and economies; instead, it constitutes an ethical moment in which an absolute and indescribable otherness is welcomed” (4). What defines “an ethical character” of the feminine Sublime is the possible encounter with “the alterity of the other” in a moment of wonder as one opposed to Burke’s view of the Sublime in which fear is the primary force, which excludes others and therefore differences (5). The feminine Sublime, she suggests “does not domesticate the object that might a source of threat. Instead, it accepts the relationship of pleasure and pain, or life and death, and the potential dispersal of the self” (2). Unlike the dominating and controlling self in the traditional Sublime, the self in the experience of the feminine Sublime is annihilated or dissolved. From Irigaray to Zynliska, these theorists offer distinctive prospective in the formation of the discourse of the feminine Sublime, to which my readings of Carson is greatly indebted.

III. Anne Carson on the Sublime
During an interview with the Paris Review, Carson explicates her understanding of the traditional Sublime:

In the conventional descriptions of the sublime, like Kant’s, there’s usually a trigger from the phenomenal world, a thunderstorm or a cliff or a vast starry night—vertigo of the infinite—from which the self recoils in horror or dread, and then recovers itself. There’s an ambivalent motion in that reaction to the sublime. Dread followed by a recovery of the feeling of mastery, a soaring sensation of “look at this incredible dread, and how I rise above it with my amazing human mind!” (Aiken 22).

This passage is an accurate description of the Kantian Sublime, and Carson calls the supremacy of the reason “the feeling of mastery,” which gives rise to the sense of self-elevation. Carson’s interest in the long scholarship is further developed in the “Foam (Essay with Rhapsody): On the Sublime in Longinus and Antonioni” (hereafter “Foam”) where Carson attempts to destabilize the notion of the Sublime, and the theme of the essay is perused in the lyric poems “Sublimes,” which will be discussed in Chapter two.

In “Foam,” Carson presents her view on the ancient theory of the Sublime. It consists of two parts: an essay with two sections “Spill” and “Stop,” and a prose “The Day Antonioni Came to the Asylum (Rhapsody).” Throughout the essay, the first part of “Foam,” Carson uses many quotations from Longinus’ On the Sublime as a basis of her rereading of the Sublime. The notion of the Kantian Sublime is associated with her interpretation of Longinus’ Sublime. In addition, Carson’s rereading of the Sublime involves the fictionalized representation of the historical figures of the Italian
film-maker Antonioni and one of his leading actresses, Bosé. The interaction between the director and the actress during the process of filming comes to be another focus of Carson’s discussion on the Sublime. The second part of “Foam” is written from a perspective of a patient in a lunatic asylum, and it tells a story about Antonioni’s filming a documentary in the asylum.

In the first part of “Foam,” Carson responds to Longinus’s concept that the magnitude of the Sublime is such that the soul may be overwhelmed. In this essay, Carson terms the influence of the Sublime as “spillage,” and as she reveals to us that how the idea of the Sublime comes to being and how it is passed down to us: it is Medias’ public slap that leads to Demosthenes’ speech; it is the speech that engenders Longinus’ praise in On the Sublime; it is Antonioni’s telling of the process of his filming that results in Carson’s inspiration of reapproaching the notion of the Sublime (45-46). The moment of “spillage” takes place when a soul can relate to other souls, exceeding the limit of time and space. This spilling force between writers and readers is again unleashed on the boundary between Antonioni and one of his leading actresses, Lucia Bosé. Yet, the spillage here becomes monstrous and dangerous, as Antonioni violently interferes with Bosé’s performance, and here Carson purposely rephrases the quotation: “to obtain the results I wanted I had to use insults, abuse, hard slap”(47). It is not clear whether Antonioni really physically attacks Bosé, because Carson misleadingly rephrases the quote from Antonioni, who actually says “I had to direct her almost with a sense of violence… If it was a sad scene, I had to make her cry; if it was a happy scene, I had to make her laugh” (Antonioni 41).

Carson’s intentional change of content of Antonioni’s words indicates the fact that “Antonioni plunders a boundary between her [Bosé’s] and her part” (Carson 47). The sense of banditry echoes the sense of “mastery” that Carson defines the Kantian
Sublime, which suggests the supremacy of reason as higher faculty over imagination and the subject’s dominance over other objects.

After her discussion of this sense of superiority of reason in the mind, Carson shifts her focus to the experience of self-disintegration in the Sublime. Carson borrows the moment of the Sublime from Longinus, who, Carson suggests, describes Homer becomes “as sublime as his subject matter: Look this is the real Homer who storms like a wind alongside the fighting men, none the other than Homer who ‘rages as when spearshaking Ares or ruinous fire in the mountains rages, in folds of deep forest, and foam is around his mouth’” (emphasis added, 47). Here the keyword in the title of Carson’s essay appears. Foam is a sign of the Carsonian Sublime, because it shows how an artist is deeply involved with his or her own creation. Carson tells us that Longinus is “covered with foam” in completing On the Sublime (48). Foam represents the split of self in the process of artistic creation, as Carson quotes from one of the most well-known line from Longinus “Sublimity is the echo of a great soul” (61). For Carson, the Sublime is evoked at the passionate moment when the artists can apply the disintegrated self to the formation of his or her work. This is why Carson proposes that “Longinus’s use of Longinus” is Sublime, so is “Antonioni’s use of Antonioni” (49). Disney argues that Carson’s own description of the Sublime as the decentered-self bears the trace of late twentieth-century theory of the feminine Sublime, as it resembles Yaeger’s definition, in which the feminine Sublime exhibits a feature of multiplicity of the self (26). In addition to the decentered self, following Zylinska’s contention of the dispersal of the self, Disney also points out “a form of selfless, Sublime disembodiment” in Carson’s rewriting of the Sublime (27). The annihilation of the self, as Carson implies, occurs when artists passionately creates his or her work, as “they burn all before them as are carried along,” which Carson quotes
from Longinus and rewrites again. In addition to the reference to Longinus, Carson also associates with the self-dissolution with the Burkean and the Kantian Sublime. The Sublime soul disappears, Carson suggests, in the reaction against the threat, typical of the Burkean and the Kantian Sublime, which arises in the alteration from the occurrence of danger to surety of salvation and safety (48). In the poem “Gnosticism VI,” Carson terms the Burkean Sublime “a ‘science of anxiety’” (93). The source of anxiety comes from “dire things (volcanoes, oceans, ecstasies) and dire reaction (death, dread, transport)” (48). The soul “is all but lost” in responding to these terrible things (48). Carson’s attempt of rewriting Longinus, Burke and Kant is not only her reflection of these thinkers but also an emphasis on the dissolution of the self, which is alien to the traditional masculine Sublime. Carson’s strategy of rereading the long history of the Sublime is to subvert from within the discourse.

The above survey of the history of the Sublime demonstrates the change of discourse of the Sublime in the past two millennia. The theorization of the Sublime before the nineteenth century, including the works written by Burke and Kant, are categorized as the masculine Sublime from a feminist prospective, for they emphasize the dominance of the self over other objects. In the discussion of the feminine Sublime, the Kantian Sublime is often regarded as the misogynist Sublime for excluding female in the experience of the Sublime and dismissing female as the beautiful. The characteristics of the feminine Sublime suggest a relationship of intersubjectivity or even the disembodiment of the self. In the essay “Foam,” Carson plays off the canonical concepts of the Sublime of Longinus, Burke and Kant, and successfully combines them into one main idea: the self disappears in the experience.

5 The original text from On the Sublime goes: “It is true that Bacchylides and Ion are faultless and entirely elegant writers of the polished school, while Pindar and Sophocles, although at times they burn everything before them as it were in their swift career, are often extinguished unaccountably and fail most lamentably” (emphasis added, Longinus 129).
of the Sublime. In addition to adopting the notion of self-annihilation, Carson, like other feminist writers of the Sublime, questions the faculty of reason that controls the subject’s view of his body and the world from an elevated point of view in the Kantian Sublime. In the suite of poems “Sublimes,” Carson presents her observation of the Kantian Sublime and describes how Monica Vitti, one of Antonioni’s favorite actresses as an Sublime subject lives with the experience of the Kantian Sublime. Vitti is portrayed as a neurotic patient who wants everything, which is the symptom of the subject of the Kantian Sublime demanded by the superego. In next chapter, through a lens of psychoanalysis, I will argue that Vitti is presented as a subject with the fantasy of the Kantian Sublime, and that the fantasy will be traversed because of the destabilized spectatorship.
Chapter 2

The Fantasy of the Kantian Sublime in “Sublimes”

In the suite of poems “Sublimes,” Carson mainly deals with the Kantian Sublime, and draws our attention to the aftermath of acquiring this elevated feeling and the inherent spectatorship in this experience. In “Ode to the Sublime by Monica Vitti,” Vitti becomes obsessive about her desire for everything, as she shows her mental condition is demanded by the supereogic moral law in the Sublime. In addition to being the pathological subject of the Kantian Sublime, Vitti comes to be the Sublime object in the gaze of Kant in “Kant’s Question about Monica Vitti.” In the beginning of this chapter, I will first introduce Lacan’s theory as the basic framework of this study and explain the terms such as “object a,” “gaze” and “fantasy.” With the application of Lacan’s theory, I will elaborate the formation of the fantasy of the Kantian Sublime in Carson’s poems and the possibility of traversing the fantasy after Vitti as the sublime object challenges Kant’s gaze. The traversing of fantasy of Kantian/ masculine Sublime will lead us to the feminine Sublime in Carson’s poem in the next chapter.

I. The Theoretical Framework of the Lacanian Psychoanalysis

Of the most important among the Lacanian concepts are the three fundamental categories of imaginary, symbolic, and real. The first phase of formative period for the subject is the mirror stage, a process of identification of one’s body from the specular image. The formation of the ego occurs via the identification of one’s body in this determinative phase. The term, identification, refers to “the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [assume] an image” (Écrits 76). The baby can see the whole image of his body owing to the relatively advanced visual
development, while the psychical coordination is still immature at six months (Evans 115). There is a subsequent tension between the image of unity and the motor impotence that leads to an experience of a fragmented body for the child. Between the two incongruous developments, the subject chooses to identify with the image, hence forming the ego. As Lacan comments on the tempospatial relation as well as the conflict between one’s inner and outside world,

This development is experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the individual’s formation into history: the mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation— and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an “orthopedic” form of its totality— and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure. (Écrits 78).

The child anticipates the illusionary image of the whole body in the mirror stage, and the contrast between this false recognition of wholeness and the uncoordinated and fragmented body gives rise to the subject’s anxiety and aggressiveness. The identification with the false image is the only resolution to ease the aggressive tension. Even though this phantom of ideal fullness of the body gives the subject a moment of jubilation, it is still a product of misrecognized image. The appearance of the ego in the mirror stage thus points to the alienation the subject. Rather than functioning as an effect, alienation is fundamental to the imaginary. Lacan defines that “[a]lienation is the imaginary as such” (Seminar III 146). The specular image, also termed the ego
and the other, is alienated from the subject, and in this synthetic image the subject first establishes the self-image, which comes be the source of his narcissistic self-love.

After the mirror stage, the child enters another decisive period of time, the Oedipus complex, which is first brought forth by Freud. It is a relation between the subject and its parents: “the subject desires one parent, and thus enters into rivalry with the other” (Evans 127). Lacan first follows Freud regarding this subject, but in 1950s, Lacan develops his distinguishing points from Freud’s, one of which is the triangular structure constituted by the subject, the mother, and the phallus (the father) (Seminar III 319). As a holder of the phallus, the father comes to be the key factor influencing this triadic relationship, where the father intervenes in the dual relation between the child and the mother. The Oedipus complex marks the transition from the imaginary to the symbolic order, leaving a lack in both the child and the mother—the child fears the loss of the phallus and the mother is imaged as deprived of it (Seminar III 319). With the function of the phallus that establishes the triadic relationship, the Oedipus complex brings “a law of symbolization” that regulates the child’s desire and prohibits the child’s approach to the mother (Seminar III 83). The castration anxiety occurring out of the Oedipus complex marks the lack the subject, and subsequently leads to the formation of desire. The subject’s attempt to fill the lack with an object, however, is doomed to be futile.

Yet, why does Lacan privilege the phallus and its loss? For an infant, the presence in the male and the absence in the female make the penis the primary model of the creation of the signifier and essential binary opposition (Boothby 170). The role of penis points to other partial objects, including breast, feces, voice and gaze, all assuming “the status of primitive signifiers” (Boothby 170). The body then becomes the crucial locus where language takes shape. The importance of the Oedipus stage
lies in children’s accession to language. The infant child’s identification with the father marks his relation with the symbolic, when the child starts to refer to himself with the “I.” The function of the father not only designates the significance of the phallus, but also the position of the “I” in the signifying chain. The subject realizes there is no place for him in the symbolic, which is determined by the relationship of desire between the father and the mother (Evans 129). The intervention of the father leads to the child’s confusion of the mother’s desire, and hence, the unconditional love is demanded from the Other. There is an eternal impossibility to ever satisfy the lack of the subject, and this impossible task makes the subject always desire what the Other wants from him. The infant wants to be loved, to be desired, to be what the Other, or the mother, wants, that is, the phallus. This is the power engine of desire. The object a is what Lacan terms the cause of desire, objects that sets the desire in motion, including breasts, gaze and voice.

As Lacan continues to develop his theory, the object a is defined as “a kind of remainder, a scrap or residue unassimilable by either the imaginary or the symbolic. As such, it is attributable to the real” (Boothby 243). Unlike the symbolic, the real is not based on mutual differences of signifiers but a place with no absence, no differentiation, and no rupture (Evans 159). The dimension of the real pertains to the characters of the impossibility of and resistance to symbolization. The nature of the real is resistance, “resistance to representation (Weber 106). In the process of signification, something eludes the world of signifiers into the real, where the inassimilable, the inarticulate and the non-integrated objects return as hallucinations or traumatic dreams. “The real is the object of anxiety” that “presents itself in the form of trauma” (Evans 160). It is its nature of impossibility and resistance that makes the real the traumatic kernel for the subject, who always situates himself on the path.
of desire yet never could obtain satisfaction. The real is the place of the lost object but which he does not encounter. With more elaboration and interpretation, Lacan makes the real the most elusive and mysterious of the three orders. The real, Lacan indicates, “is the mystery of the speaking body, the mystery of the unconscious” (Seminar XX 131). Through the reordering of the Freudian unconscious, Lacan unveils the gap through which the subject establishes a screen to cover the traumatic real. What does the subject not want to see? Where does the subject encounter the real? All these questions point to the core of unconscious desire, the object a.

It is hard to ignore the subtle relationship between the object a and the three fundamental orders of imaginary, symbolic, and real. It is related the operation of the three, “yet belong exclusively to none of them” (Boothby 243). The object a works as a surplus of the symbolic while it “never loses its imaginary status” (Evans 125). Its liminal character also appears in its relation between the subject and the other. Dangling between the subject and other, the object a paradoxically emerges as something of the subject’ own, the most “intimate” partition, while looms outside the subject, as an ungraspable shadow (Boothby 243). It is “extimate,” being external yet intimate. The intangible object that incessantly lures the subject hence comes to be the locus around which the drive revolves. It drives the subject to see more, to eat more and want more, yet it remains impalpable at the spectrally close distance. As Lacan suggests, “It is here that I propose that the interest the subject takes in his own split is bound up with that which determines it – namely, a privileged object, which has emerged from some primal separation, from some self-mutilation induced by the very approach of the real, whose name, in our algebra, is the object a” (Four Fundamental 83). The object a emerges as the object cause of desire, an imaginary partial object which is separated from the rest of the body (Evans 125). It is
“something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ” (Boothby 244). In the subject’s relation to the other, the moment of separation evokes the primordial act of sacrifice in which the infant thinks s/he gives away the breast to the mother, hereby forming the subject by ceding the breast. While the action of ceding can be regarded as a strategy of survival for the constitution of the subject, “the loss of the part establishes the whole virtually, negatively, retroactively” (Boothby 246-67). The partial objects call forth the essential question about the target and motive in the act of ceding and sacrifice. The infant gives up some body parts in order to evade the sense of anxiety, which exists prior to the loss of the object (Boothby 246). The preceding anxiety “is linked to the fact that I do not know what object a I am for the desire of the Other” (Boothby 246). The mother, not as the imaginary other in the mirror stage but as the “unknowable, unmasterable, and monstrous big Other,” takes on the part of das Ding, when the infant faces the question of the mother’s desire at the breast (Boothby 246). Again, ceding the breast is to escape “the anxious confrontation with the real of the maternal Thing” (Boothby 247).

The incarnation of the object a initiates a transition from the imaginary to the symbolic order, and in this process the desire of the Other as the Thing is also separated from the imaginary order and transferred to the symbolic by means of successive figuration of the object a (Boothby 272). The object a locates “its most primitive representatives in the imaginary, as clearly imaged parts of the body” and yet unattainable in the image (243). As a remnant unassimilable in the symbolic and the imaginary, it is an object impossible to fully emerge, and yet it’s attributable to the real as such (243). Because of its characteristic of perpetual loss, the object a becomes the cause of the desire “around which the drive moves” (Four Fundamental 257).
Described as the object-cause of desire, the object \( a \) is ceded and essentially lacking object whose absence precedes its presence, therefore giving rise to the onset of desire (244). The drive circles around the primordially lost objects of body parts—the breast, the fasces, the phallus, the gaze, and the voice...etc—rather than seek to obtain them (Four Fundamental 179). In the circuit of the object \( a \), the demolition of the fixed imaginary order opens up the dimension of jouissance at the entry of the Symbolic. The subject reaches the threshold of the symbolic by ceding the imaginary phallus for the mother, that is, by renunciation of jouissance, so as to climb up the ladder of desire in a painful way (Evans 92). The ceded and perpetually lacking objects are in this sense furnished with jouissance and thus illustrate its becoming of a unknowable locus around which the desire revolve, without ever fulfilling the kernel (Boothby 244).

The term jouissance has an apparent sexual connotation. The father that symbolizes castration forbids incestuous enjoyment, and this primal prohibition stays inside the subject’s mind like a speaking parasite. The enjoyment becomes impossible yet tempting. Paradoxically, the more the subject is forbidden from the unreachable object, the more his desire tends to cross the limit. It is precisely the forbidding that supports the transgression of jouissance (Ethics 177). Jouissance as the inaccessible pleasure is transgression as such. A child would attempt everything to pursue the pleasure of the forbidden, though the father forbids, as Lacan indicates, “the subject will realize that his desire is merely a vain detour with the aim of catching the jouissance of the other—in so far as the other intervenes, he will realize that there is a jouissance beyond the pleasure principle” (Four Fundamental 183-84). As opposed to the pleasure principle that exclusively attempts to prevent unpleasure and acquire pleasure, jouissance is a combination of pain and pleasure at the limit of desire. The
result of transgressing the boundary of pleasure is a painful suffering, “the suffering that he derives from his own satisfaction” (Evans 92). The subject’s desire is in the direction of not only regaining the lost object so as to fill the lack but also seeking to trespass the borderline of the traumatic core of the lack.

The world of desire is staged through the mechanism of fantasy, which veils the lack of the Other that haunts the subject and provides the subject with a shield against the traumatic experience of castration. Prohibited from the phallus, the subject is restricted to live in the symbolic world as a barred subject. Lacan formulates this status of desire in a matheme ($\Diamond a$), which describes the barred subject as a result of its acceptance of the Symbolic law and positioned in relation to the object $a$ (Boothby 262). As the object cause of the subject’s desire, the object $a$ offers a course by which the subject can fantasize the desire of the Other (Boothby 272). It gives the fantasy its frame and turns the subject into desiring being (Boothby 276). In the middle place between the imaginary and the symbolic, fantasy is ambiguous, “always a picturing, an imaginal figuration, yet always aims toward something unimaginable,” which assumes the question “che vuoi” (Boothby 275). The structure of fantasy is a response to the enigmatic desire of the Other—what does the Other want from me? By giving an answer to this question or, to put it this way, filling out the void caused by the Other, the subject is able to, as Žižek points out, “evade the deadlock in which the Other wants something from us” (The Sublime Object 114). The acquisition of the phallus is denied far back into the time of the Oedipus complex, so it is impossible to ever satisfy or “correctly” respond to the Other. In this sense, fantasy is constructed to defend against the lack in the Other and to be a screen upon which the subject can see the projected desire. The frame of fantasy thus becomes “both that which enables the subject to sustain his desire and ‘that by which the subject sustains himself at the level
of his vanishing desire’’ (Écrits 272). In the dialectic between the subject’s desire via Other’s desire, the subject constructs the imaginary scenario of fantasy, and fantasy as such is the structure of the subject. How does the fantasmatic screen appear? This question points to the core of fantasy, the object a. The successive figurations of a enables the subject to pass the enigmatic question into “the folding of a symbolic process” (Boothby 272). One of the drives that support desire is the scopic drive. Fantasy is described as in the closest relation to it, as Lacan develops theoretical account of the gaze in Seminar XIII. For the subject, the representation of object a in fantasy is presented in visual form. However, the ideal image in the fantasmatic projection is not seen with the physical eyes but something other than the visual organ, the gaze. In the reading of the suite of poems “Sublimes,” this notion of gaze will be used to explain how the fictional Kant peeps in the room of the female movie star, Vitti.

To discuss the difference between the eye and the gaze, we have to start with how Lacan is influenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In 1964, Lacan started to offer his view on visual arts with the notion of the gaze, and reinterpreted his scheme of desire with the conception of the object a. In the same year, The Visible and the Invisible published by Merleau-Ponty, and this posthumous work points out the limit of the traditional philosophy, which starts with Plato, that an aesthetic standard is set with sovereign good and hence a sense of the beautiful is acquired. For Merleau-Ponty, this blind spot is mainly subjected to the way one uses his eyes to see the world, to move his body, and to anticipate every event to come. Lacan generally agrees with Merleau-Ponty’s views on the limitation of the eye, yet he further proposes that there is something prior to the eyes, “the pre-existence of a gaze— I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides” (Four
The gaze cannot be reduced to eyes, because it is prior to the act of looking. Nature, as Lacan observes, has presented us the phenomenon of the gaze without the eye: the mimicry. Certain butterflies have ocelli, eyelike markings, on their wings so as to intimidate their potential enemies. In the eyes of those predators, butterflies’ eyespots can see their impending danger. One instance in our human world is dummy police officers standing on the road to keep people away from closed traffic or trick drivers into obeying traffic rules. The examples above shows that the gaze as the object does not involve the function of the eye of a seer, but the possibility of being seen by the Other. Lacan refers to an example of the voyeur in Satre’s text, in which a gaze emerges when leaves rustle in the breeze. These particular sounds are heard at the same moment when the voyeur is looking through a keyhole. What drives him to carry out this shameful action of looking is not someone behind the keyhole but the possible presence of others looking at him. The gaze is imagined by the subject “in the field of the Other” (*Four Fundamental* 84). It is exactly why the gaze is unfathomable in the way that the gaze is “the object of the scopic drive” (Evans 72). In the dimension of the scopic drive, the split between what one sees and the gaze is revealed. Lacan explains this distinction with one idea, “the stain” (*Four Fundamental* 74). As intermediary material between the subject and the Other, the stain designates the gaze as “the pre-existence of the seen of a given-to-be-seen” (*Four Fundamental* 74). If the stains are the eyespots on the wings and makeup on people’s faces, those “given to be seen,” the order in question then goes the gaze, a given-to-be-seen, and the eye. These external decorations and markings are meant for the sight of the Other, pointing out that the gaze of the Other already precedes what wants to be seen, and finally the eye can cast a look. The seen subject senses the Other watching him or her. It is because of the relation between the gaze and the
desire of the gazer that the conventional order of the eye over the gaze is overthrown. The stain intricately covers the gaze projected from the Other and the traces of the subject’s desire, yet this stain functions as a spotlight exposing the presence of the gaze, revealing the Other’s reality (Quinet 144). If the stain or the spot represents the screen against which one sees a resembling image, the question is, “Why can’t one as subject see oneself as who s/he is?” Lacan says “an avoidance of the gaze is at work here,” since the gaze eludes the form of sight “that is satisfied with itself in imaging itself as consciousness” (Four Fundamental 74). That the refusal of clearly recognizing oneself gives satisfaction results from the desire of the lack. If the lack of the subject remains as an irremovable void, the function of fantasy is in the service of constructing and stabilizing the subject’s existence. The gaze gives the subject the frame of fantasy, which offers s/he a way to live. Paradoxically, the object a, the stake of desire and fantasy, prevents the subject from seeing who s/he is and simultaneously provides a semblance in the imaginary form that enables narcissistic identification. The object a is already contained in the gaze and, as Lacan claims,

what specifies the scopic field and engenders the satisfaction proper to it is the fact that, for structural reasons, the fall of the subject always remains unperceived, for it is reduced to zero. In so far as the gaze, qua the object a, may come to symbolize this central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration, and in so far as it is an object a reduced, of its nature, to a punctiform, evanescent function, it leaves the subject in ignorance so characteristic of all progress in thought that occurs in the way constituted by philosophical research (Four Fundamental 76-77).

The object a symbolizes the primal void left by castration while enabling the subject to fill the hole up with a response of fantasy, by which the subject imagines a primal
unity and then a sense of satisfaction is acquired. This is a level of “visual apprehension,” Lacan adds, and this is where the stain in the scopic function is found as well as the split between the gaze and vision (*Four Fundamental 77*). The gaze is elusive from our vision, since what it presents to us, Lacan suggests, is the object a, “the form of a strange contingency,” that symbolizes the lack of castration anxiety (*Four Fundamental 72-73*). The vision of reality itself is an illusionary whole, with which the subject identifies, while the real is always lurking behind the fantasmatic mask and the gaze of the Other. When the subject comes to recognize the lack in the Other, the fantasy can be traversed or crossed (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* 62). In other words, he realizes that it is useless to get hold of the imaginary object that determines his attitude toward the reality so as to construct himself or herself again as a subject. The structure of fantasy will be further discussed with the notion of the Kantian sublime and with my reading of the suite of poems “Sublimes.”

The basic framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis provides us a way to look into how human beings see reality, which is not as objective as we think. If the feeling of the Kantian Sublime is related to the experience of seeing certain objects in reality, Lacan’s theory might shed light on what the Kantian subject feels or sees in psychoanalytic terms. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, my attempt to read the Kantian Sublime in Carson’s poems in *Decreation* will help us understand how Carson employs the Kantian/masculine Sublime so as to develop her own idea of the feminine Sublime. In my discussion, the suite of poems in *Decreation* entitled “Sublimes” will serve as a bridge between Kant’s philosophy on the Sublime and Lacanian psychoanalysis. I will begin with how Carson describes the Kantian subject in the “Ode to the Sublime by Monica Vitti” (hereafter “Ode to the Sublime”) along with some of Kant’s notions on the Sublime in the poems, such as “reason,” “nature”
and “respect.” The further investigation of these notions allows us to discover the possibility of deep affinities between Kant’s philosophical ideas and psychoanalysis. Zupančič has argued the fantasy structure is inherent in feeling of the Kantian Sublime (Ethics of the Real 142-167). With Zupančič’s interpretation of Kant’s philosophy in the vein of psychoanalysis, I attempt to demonstrate the formation of the fantasy of the Kantian Sublime and the traversing of the fantasy in the “Sublimes.”

II. The Fantasy of the Kantian Sublime in “Sublimes”: the Superegoic Moral Law

I will argue that the poetic persona, Vitti, is presented as a subject living in the fantasy of the Kantian Sublime because of the endless demand from the superegoic moral law in the poem, “Ode to the Sublime by Monica Vitti” (hereafter “Ode to the Sublime”). Carson presents an anxious voice of the subject in the experience of the Sublime by focusing on Vitti who “embodies the Sublime, especially in Red Desert” (Aitken 225). If the Sublime is a feeling internal to the subject, this poem tells us how the subject’s mental condition is after acquiring the experience of the Sublime. Vitti explicitly tells us her desire in the very first line: “I want everything. /Everything is a naked thought that strikes” (65). What is everything? Vitti gives us the following things:

A foghorn sounding though fog makes the fog seem to be everything.

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6 In this film by Antonioni, Monica Vitti plays a mentally ill woman, Guiliana married to a factory manager, Urgo. For the operation of a new factory, Urgo is recruiting new workers with his colleague, Corrado, who later begins an affair with Guiliana. As the story unfolds, Guiliana’s mental condition gets worse, as we are shown her expressing a greater and greater degree of isolation. After realizing her son is tricking her into believing that he has contracted polio, the desperate woman goes to Corrado’s apartment where they have sex. This intimacy does not relieve her desperate feeling of loneliness, and then she wanders to a dockside ship and meets a foreign sailor, with whom she tries to communicate her feelings but in vain. The film ends with a scene in which she wanders into poisonous field outside her husband’s factory, which is similar to the opening scene. This similarity of the opening and ending indicates her unsolvable feeling of isolation.
Quail eggs eaten from the hand in fog make everything aphrodisiac.

My husband shrugs when I say so, my husband shrugs at everything. The lakes where his factory has poisoned everything are as beautiful as Brueghel.

I keep my shop, in order that I may sell everything there, empty but I leave the light on.

Everything might spill. (65) Let us recall that Carson describes her idea of the Sublime as a power of spillage, so we can find that the sign of the Sublime also emerges in this poem. Carson/Vitti makes a reality of Kant’s idea if the Sublime only exists in our mind. “‘Everything,’” Kant says, exists only in our mind, attended by/ a motion of pleasure and/ pain that throws itself back and forth in me. . .” (65). Everything appears to include the Sublime and is the Sublime. Lying on Corrado’s bed, Vitti feels everything as the Sublime that alternates between displeasure and pleasure inside her. The mixed feeling of the Sublime, from the Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective, is jouissance, a painful pleasure. Žižek points out that the Sublime is “beyond the pleasure principle” and “a paradoxical pleasure procured by displeasure itself (the exact definition— one of the Lcanian definitions— of enjoyment [jouissance])” (The Sublime Object 229). Eager to acquire this pleasure-in-pain, Vitti is so pathologically desperate for everything that she has to go to “a clinic for people who want everything,” and she is also fighting with everything through Corrado, remaining “undaunted” (66). To discuss the undaunted feeling, we have to look into another poem also from “Sublimes,” entitled “And Reason Remains Undaunted.”

The title of this poem suggests that the undaunted feeling is supported by the Kantian reason. In the beginning of the poem, the “I” deliberately walks into nature
only to find purposive nature succumbing to the function of reason as a higher faculty: “searching for things sublime I walked up into the muddy windy big hills / behind the town where trees riot according to their own law. . .” (62). Carson presents the force and magnitude of nature that arouses the typical Kantian Sublime. If the poetic persona were to find the Sublime in nature, it would be contradictory to Kant’s theory of the Sublime. What Carson wants to illustrate is the domination of reason in the mind. As Kant claims in Critique of Judgment, “the Sublime is not to be sought in the things of nature, but only in our ideas [of reason]” (Critique of Judgment 109). The poetic persona perceives different patterns of “moving green—under, over, around, across, / up the back, higher, fanning, condensing, rifled, flat in the eye, as if / pacing a / cell” (emphasis added, 62). Watching these various movements of leaves or grass appear to be like walking into the vigorous and small unit in an organism and experience dynamic force of nature; yet this observation, in fact, allows us to find out the restriction of reason that regulates nature to be purposive, as if the relationship between the subject and nature is confined in a prison cell. For Kant, nature means that all the things and events that behave on the basis of the natural laws (Burnham 98). It is reason of its a priori law that determines nature as perceivable phenomenon (Kant, Critique of Judgment 41). In the process of deciding a Sublime object, the subject confirms the supremacy of the mind over nature (Shaw 80). Following Kant’s logic about the superior reason, Carson portrays nature as a confined cell littered with “grand objects, minutely, absorbed, one leaf at a time,” and then she coins puzzling compound adjectives and phrases like “ocean-furious, nettle-streaked, roping along, unmowed, fresh out of pools” (62). These phrases seem to depict the vigor of nature, yet they reinforce the impression that nature is still inferior to reason by showing nature like a captured fish “fresh out of the pool” and unmowed grasses waiting to be
mowed. Continuing to strengthen the feeling of “undaunted,” Carson describes that the position of reason is as “clear as Babel” (62). This phrase appears to be an oxymoron that puts “clear” and “confusing” together, but it depicts an image of the impossible height of reason. Reason is like a magnificent tower with its shadow “scattered through the heart” and it is “crownly, carrying the secrets of its own heightening on / up” (62). Carson even personifies reason with a face that scorns “with blazing nostrils” (62). Reason is “not a / servant” (62) but a master who demands the mind to be elevated to a certain superior position and protects the subject from threatening storm in nature in a safe place, watching the storm swirling from “not rapid” to “rapid” (62). Let’s recall that in the dynamical Sublime, the sense of self-preservation from powerful objects of nature is evoked by the rational faulty of mind, and the courage against nature that arouses fear in us is respect. Respect is the feeling of our incapacity to attain to an idea, which is a law for us (Kant, Critique of Judgment 119), and it is, of course, at the disposal of reason. In other words, respect is the feeling for “the superiority of the rational determination” in the Sublime experience (Kant, Critique of Judgment 119). Kant’s conception of respect involves the moral law, which drives people toward the highest good.

Zupančič argues that the feeling of respect is aroused when the subject “sees herself [or himself] being subjected to the law, and observes herself [or himself] being humiliated and terrified” (146). She emphasizes an inner voice and a gaze is at work under the moral law, and to validate her point, she quotes from Kant’s Critique of

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According to the Bible, the Babel is the name of a city where people built a tower of the same name in an attempt to reach sky so as to make a name for themselves. During that period of time, people spoke one single language and were united to finish this daring task, which irritated God so much that God decided to destroy the tower, confounded their language, and scattered the united human beings over the earth. Because of speaking different language, human beings around the world could not understand each other anymore, so they would not united again to challenge God. In Hebrew, Babel means to jumble and to confuse.
Practical Reason: “In the boundless esteem, for the pure moral law... whose voice makes even the boldest sinner tremble and forces him to hide from its gaze, there is something so singular that we cannot wonder at finding the influence of a merely intellectual idea on feeling to be inexplicable to speculative reason...” (emphasis added, 83). In relation to the feeling of respect, the moral law as a motive is “a law that both observes and speaks” (Zupančič 146). With the characteristics of the inner voice and gaze, the moral law is undoubtedly the law of the superego. The superego acts as censorship built for subject. In addition to its relationship with the law, Lacan points out that it has a “senseless, blind character, of pure imperativeness and simple tyranny” (Seminar I 102). The superego itself is a “sense less law” that fails to recognize [méconnaissance] the law. There is the voice that the subject hears within his consciousness, and this voice is of “the devilish character” and of the “sadistic superego” (Miller 222). The aggressiveness of the superego is the underside of the Name-of-the-Father that is associated with the law.

Zupančič’s elaboration on the logic of the superego and the Kantian Sublime sheds light on Vitti’s desire for and resistance against everything as the Sublime in “Ode to the Sublime.” The experience of the Sublime brings Vitti jouissance, and she repeatedly asks for more of it— “everything I see everything I taste everything I touch/everyday even the ashtrays . . .” (66). The fact that jouissance is a pleasure-in-pain results from its endless impulse of approaching the dimension of das Ding, and this transgression of jouissance is a deadly search because of the encounter with das Ding. As long as the subject attempts to reach das Ding, the function of the superego begins to work by commanding the subject not to go beyond the pleasure principle and to just “enjoy as little as possible” (Evans 91). The paradoxical relationship between jouissance and the superego lies in the prohibition of the superego. The
greater extent the super ego is prohibited, the stronger the desire for jouissance. Jouissance is thus transgression itself. Zupančič’s discussion on the Kantian Sublime and the superego follows exactly the same logic of Lacan’s logic of jouissance and the superego— “The stronger the subject’s superego, the more this subject will be susceptible to the feeling of the sublime” (Zupančič 154). It is the superego that protects the subject from the traumatic Thing by keeping a distance, “a kind of disinterestedness in the face of something of drastic concern” (Zupančič 154). The feeling of the Sublime, Zupančič suggests, is born in the dimension of the superego. The necessary condition of the feeling of Kantian Sublime is that the subject is in a safe place when facing the forceful nature that could bring immediate threat. Zupančič points out that it is like looking out from the window to see a hurricane, a perfect example of Lacan’s structure of fantasy (Zupančič 158). In the elaboration of the dynamical Sublime, Kant says:

Thunderclouds puling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightening and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind. . .—compared to the might of any of these, our ability to resist becomes an insignificant trifle. Yet the sight of them becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, provided we are in a safe place. (emphasis added, qtd. in Zupančič 158)

In the face of a fascinating and fearful spectacle of nature, the subject of the Kantian Sublime becomes insignificant due to his or her powerless sensibility, subject to a greater force outside the window of a shelter. This is an illustration of Kant’s “pathos of apathy”— putting aside the feelings for the action toward morality— and points to the structure of fantasy, which, as discussed in previous section, is to veil the lack of
the Other and to offer the subject a stable existence. As Zupančič points out, Kant’s statement of the Sublime projects his fundamental fantasy, “in which the subject is entirely passive, an inert matter given over to the enjoyment of the Law” (Zupančič 158). In “Ode to the Sublime” and “Mia Moglie (Longinus’s Red Desert)”¹, we can discern the fantasy of the Kantian Sublime in the Monica Vitti, who is a rather passive subject succumbing to the superegoic moral law inherent in the feeling of respect.

In Vitti’s eyes, the Sublime becomes everything that she desires and resists, and everything is “a naked thought that strikes” (65) so hard in her mind that she wants nothing but everything. The thought that strikes is akin to Lacan’s statement, “[t]he law is entirely reduced to something, which cannot even be repressed, like You must” (Seminar I 102). We cannot find a voice of a fatherly figure in the poem, because the voice is already there in the moral law that arouses the feeling of respect. The residual of the voice is the noises caused by “a naked thought that strikes” (65), which forbids her to desire but, at the same time, orders her to desire everything. The alternation between prohibition and command makes the desire stronger yet fatal. When Corrado asks “Do you know that in the deepest part of the sea everything goes transparent,” Vitti says “Do you know how afraid I am?” (65). The thought of being unable to see everything in the sea frightens her, because the feeling of the Sublime inside her mind commands her to enjoy, to obtain jouissance for the Other, not for herself. Vitti becomes hysterical by experiencing herself “as somebody who is enacting a role for the other, his imaginary identification is his [or her] ‘being-for-the-other’” (Žižek, The Sublime Object 106). We can find the imaginary identification in “Mia Moglie,” where Vitti compares herself to a girl she met in the clinic for people who want everything, and claims that “[n]ow she is well” (68). Does Vitii come to

¹ “Mia Moglie” can be translated into English as “My Wife.”
realize that she is enacting a role for the Other because of the superegic moral law in the experience of the Sublime? Apparently she does not break through the control of the superego, since, one line later, she is paying attention to the antenna and asks a worker besides it what it is for. “To listen to the noise of stars—“as I believe I said ” Longinus adds” (original emphasis, 68). Putting aside whether Longinus does say this in On the Sublime, the attempt to receive signals from stars is already of the Kantian Sublime object. Reaching the stars and collecting data with electronic signals in the space is of spatial magnitude that exceeds our sensible faculty in the mathematical Sublime. In this poem, we can see that Vitti is still driven by the superegoic moral law in the experience of the Sublime. “If the dynamically Sublime,” Zupančič suggests, embodies the inexorable and lethal aspect of the Kantian moral agency, the mathematically Sublime, which aims at infinity and eternity, brings forth the dimension of the “infinite task” imposed upon the subject of the moral law, the fact that all we can do is approach in infinitum the pure moral act” (original emphasis, 157). It seems to be an “infinite task” for Vitti to take everything she sees, because the thought of wanting everything strikes her all the time, and forces her to want more untill she gets everything. In Lacan’s theory of desire, the subject does not know the enigmatic desire of the Other, and, by applying the same logic here, we can say Vitti encounters moral law as “a law of the unknown” (Zupančič 164). In other words, she has no idea of what the moral law wants, so she is incapable of satisfying the demand of the moral law as the Other. If Vitti embodies the Sublime, especially the Kantian Sublime, Carson presents the fundamental fantasy of the Kantian Sublime in which Vitti chases everything she sees to fill up the void caused by the moral law as the Other. Trying to capture everything in her sights, she has one only one question: “What shall I do with eyes?” at the end of “Ode to the Sublime.” Vitt’s question
marks her awareness of being controlled by the superegoic moral law, which not only brings her enjoyment but also pressure. It is the alternation between enjoyment and pressure exerted on Vitti that propels her to ask herself about her eyes that glance on everything she desires. When she raises this question, she seems to be aware of the framework of her fantasy, which is supported by the moral law. We cannot find the answer to her doubt until we read another poem “Kant’s Question about Monica Vitti,” which will lead us to see how the fictional Kant and Vitti traverses the fantasy of the Kantian Sublime.

III. Traversing the fantasy of the Kantian Sublime: Kant’s Gaze

In “Kant’s Question about Monica Vitti” (hereafter “Kant’s Question”), Carson poses a question about the gaze in the experience of the Kantian Sublime, in which Vitti becomes a Sublime object being watched by the fictional Kant as a spectator. The presentation of the poem alternates between lines imagining Kant’s thinking about Vitti, and, on the other hand, the italicized lines in which rewrites the scripts of the L’ Eclisse.9 The poem allows us not only to see some of the key idea of the Kantian Sublime coming together with the idea of gaze but also the fantasy screen though which Kant stages his desire in the experience of the Sublime. At the end of the poem, the reversal of spectatorship allows the fictional Kant and Vitti to “traverse the fantasy” of the Kantian Sublime (Fink, The Lacanian Subject 62).

The beginning of the poem presents a rather psychoanalytic diagnosis of the Kantian Sublime:

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9 L’ Elisse is regarded as the last film of Antonioni’s trilogy, which was preceded by L’ Aventura and La Notte. The film begins with minutes of silence between Vittoria, played by Monica Vitti, her boyfriend, with whom Vitti decides to break up. After leaving his apartment, Vittoria visits her mother in Rome Stock Exchange where she is introduced to her mother’s stockbroker. As the story unfolds, the two develop an affair, which comes to be undermined by the stockbroker’s materialistic nature.
It was hidden in her and it gave Kant pleasure.

L’ Eclisse begins with a wind blowing Monica Vitti’s hair. She is inside a room.”

Kant’s was a partly negative pleasure.

*Where is that wind from?*

Kant took pleasure in what he called Thing in Itself.

*She is prowling the room with her eyes down, observed deeply*

*by a man in an armchair.*

Thing in itself was unattainable, insurmountable.

*She keeps trying to leave the room.* (70)

It seems that fictional Kant is peeping in her room from a window or a hole, which gives him pleasure. This pleasure acquired in the feeling of the Sublime, let us recall, is pleasure-in-pain, *jouissance*, a form of what Kant the philosopher calls “negative pleasure” (70). Peeping from the window, Kant becomes a voyeur, looking at that something “unattainable, insurmountable” hidden in her (70). If Viiti is subject to the superegoic moral law inherent in the feeling of the Sublime as I have discussed in the previous section, the fictional Kant himself is also under the control of the moral law that speaks and observes. Encountering the infinite request of the moral law as the Other, what Carson invites us to see is the fictional Kant’s fantasy projected onto the scene he is observing and stages his desire of a possible relationship with Vitti by imagining to be that man in an armchair and be so intimate with Vitti. the fictional Kant can acquire enjoyment from watching Vitti, yet Vitti is neither the object of the mathematical Sublime nor that of the dynamical Sublime, which would arouse courage and self-respect in a rational being. Why can the fictional Kant get enjoyment from watching her, as he takes pleasure in “what he called Thing in itself?” The
answer to the question is that the fictional Kant regards Vitti as an object elevated to the place of the Thing, namely, the Lacanian Sublime.

This relation between the Kantian Sublime and the Lacanian Sublime is already elucidated by Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Žižek asserts that it is the idea of *jouissance* that associates the Kantian Sublime with the Lacanian Sublime, “an object raised to the level of the (impossible-real) Thing” (229). He continues to suggest that Kant’s definition of the Sublime prefigures “Lacan’s determination of the Sublime object” in *The Ethic of Psychoanalysis* (229). The Kantian Sublime “designates the elation of an inner-wordly, empirically, sensuous object Ding as such to the transcendent, trans-phenomenal, unattainable Thing-in-itself” (229). The Thing-in-itself as the supersensible Idea does not appear in front of our sense in the phenomenal world, hereby lacking any adequate representation. It is this inadequacy of representation of the supersensible Thing that brings both pleasure and displeasure (229-30). For Kant the philosopher, his problem is his presupposition that “the Thing-in-itself exists as something positively given beyond the field of representation, of phenomenality, which is “still dealing only with a negative presentation of the Thing,” whereas Žižek argues that “this Thing-in-itself is nothing but this radical negativity” (original emphasis, 232-33). The suprasensible Thing is the “appearance *qua* appearance,” which is nothing but “the inadequacy of the appearance to itself” (original emphasis, 234). In short, the Sublime object is regarded as the lack that fills up the unfathomable void of the Thing, unrepresentable in the Symbolic order, and it is “an embodiment of Nothing,” as Žižek puts it (234). This absolute nothingness marks the essence of das Ding as the locus of the Lacanian Sublime, in which an object is elevated to the dignity of the Thing. The process of “transubstantiation ” of an everyday object into the Sublime object accentuates “an embodiment of the
impossible Thing, i.e., as materialized Nothingness” (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 83).

Moreover, always presented as “a veiled entity” (Lacan, *Ethics* 118), the Sublime object “subsists only in shadow, in an intermediary, half-born state, as something latent, implicit, evoked”; as soon as we unveils the shadow to reveal the object, the sublime object itself melts away (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 83-4). The dazzling and alluring effect of the Sublime object is the result of its place in the fantasmatic construction.

In Carson’s concise summary of the notion of the Thing along with her description of Vitti, it is not difficult to uncover the fact that Vitti is described as the Sublime-Thing:

> Nor could Thing in Itself be represented. 

*Curtains are drawn, the room is full of objects, lamps are burning here and there who knows what hours of the night it maybe? Her hair blow slowly.*

Yet through the very failure of its representation, Thing in itself might be

> Inscribed within phenomena.

*She lifts a piece of paper, puts it down. (70)*

The impossible representation of the Thing is followed by the depiction of the room Vitti is staying in, and what the fictional Kant sees are the chaotic scene of the room and the image of her blowing hair in a flash. Viewed from the fictional Kant’s point of view, Vitti, as the Sublime object, has no real substance and is presented as something implicit and veiled. We can only find that there is something alluring about Vitti, especially her hair. Carson describes Vitti, in another poem “L’(Ode to Monica Vitti),” as “blondes / being / always / fatally / reinscribed / on an old cloth/faintly/interminably/undone. . .” (63). If Vitti occupies the place of the Thing, she has become an empty ideal, a signifier that signifies nothing but itself. The empty
and stereotypical image of her blonde hair is the cause of the fictional Kant’s desire, the object a that allows him to fantasize Vitti through his gaze. This male gaze, as Carson surely wants us to see it, conceptualizes the Kantian Sublime as a fantasy based the fictional Kant’s phallic anxiety. This gaze within gaze accentuates the woman – Thing as the embodiment of nothingness, because the fictional Kant here enjoys watching the being-looked-at-ness of Vitti, who is an inert presence for male spectators. Yet, the gaze is not a one-way perception, as Žižek points out that it “marks the point in the object (in the picture) from which the subject viewing it is already gazed at, i.e., it is the object that is gazing at me” (original emphasis, Looking Awry 125). In the end of “Ode to the Sublime,” Vitti’s inert presence has already been cancelled when she asks “what shall I do with my eyes.” As a subject of the Kantian Sublime, Vitti seems to be aware that she is in the hands of the superegoic moral law, which commands her to enjoy and take everything in her sights, and anxiously asks herself what she should do with her eyes. Vitti’s awareness in the pervious poem marks her defiance of the fictional Kant’s gaze and therefore allows her to enunciate her existence for herself. In a sense, “Kant’s Question about Monica Vitti” is an answer to the Vitti’s question about her eyes by revealing the male gaze shattered by the female’s counter-gaze. Carson discloses the two-way direction of spectatorship in the experience of the Sublime by placing two subjects of the Kantian Sublime in a scenario where the female’s counter-gaze is established to challenge the male gaze.

The sign of Carson’s definition of the Sublime, which I’ve discussed in the previous chapter, also appears, as “Kant noted a rustling aside of sensible barriers /

Her unquiet drifts in her, spills, drifts on” (emphasis added, 70). The spillage of the Sublime in Vitti foreshadows the possibility of traversing the phallic fantasy of the
Kantian Sublime in the following shift of line order, which indicates subversive results from the switch in perspective:

_A rotating fan is shown sitting on the table beside the man in the armchair._

Kant felt weak as a wave.

_Now she can leave. The surface of the movie relaxes._

Kant let his soul expand.

_She walks out into the filthy daylight._

Kant pulled his hat down firmly.

_She is a little ashamed but glad to be walking._

Off into this more difficult dawn. (71)

The switch of perspective causes the fictional Kant to feel “weak as wave,” as if the room and Vitti are not what he previously imagined, which echoes Lacan’s discussion of trompe-l’oeil of painting (that is, painting with deceptive aspect): [t]he moment when, by a mere shift of our gaze, we are able to realize that the representation does not move with the gaze and that it is merely a trompe-l'oeil. For it appears at that moment as something other than it seems, or rather it now seems to be that something else” (Four Fundamental 112). The paradox here is that spectators take his satisfaction and at the same time they realize s/he cannot be satisfied in the act of gaze (Huang “Who is looking at Whom” 55). S/he is satisfied less by looking at what the painting presents than at finding desire that supports their life. S/he can therefore traverse the fantasy so that in her/his elevated minds “their desire to contemplate finds some satisfaction in it” (Four Fundamental 111). The switch of perspective in the order of the lines points to the fictional Kant’s dissatisfaction in his gaze of Vitti and the possibility of traversing the fantasy. When Vitti is ready to leave
the room, “the surface of the movie relaxes” (71); the loose surface indicates the fictional Kant’s traversing of the fantasy, since he realizes his support of his being is nothing like what he previously recognizes. The sublime object, Vitti, in which he takes pleasure, is not as fascinating and attractive as he has been led to believe. Vitti is not reduced into a signifier anymore but as a real person, who “walks out into the filthy daylight” with a feeling of shame (71). The sense of shame or guilt is the result of the control of the superegoic moral law inherent in the feeling of the Sublime and it serves as an evidence of both Vitti and the fictional Kant’s identification with sinthome\(^{10}\), which reveals that their consistency of their existence is given by “the pathological particularity” (Žižek, *The Sublime of Ideology* 81). Both Vitti and the fictional Kant recognize that the symptom is fundamentally supported by the moral law in the Kantian Sublime. Finally, the poem ends with a rather ambiguous line: “Off into this more difficult dawn” (71). According to the order set in the second half of the poem, this line supposedly is a description of the fictional Kant’s action, yet, with the lack of subject and following after Vitti’s walking, one possible meaning could be that both of them move toward the dawn. Why does the dawn look “difficult”? This word sheds light on the destabilized spectatorship as a locus of Sublime experience, as the frustrated spectator and the active Sublime object walking into daylight together. Carson’s exploration of Kant’s notion of masculine sublimity is dawning not in a tractable way but in a “decreative” way.

A psychoanalytical reading of the group of poems, “Sublimes,” offers us a way to see how Carson plays off the Kantian Sublime. Vitti as a subject of Kantian Sublime is demanded by the superegoic moral law and becomes obsessive about her

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\(^{10}\) Žižek explains that *sinthome* is a “synthesis between symptom and fantasy” and symptom as sinthome “is literally our only substance, the only positive support of our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject. In other words, symptom is the way we—the subjects—‘avoid madness’” (*The Sublime of Ideology* 81).
desire for everything. Her attempt to capture everything in her sights pains her and leads her to ask what she should do with her eyes. This is not a question of eyes but of the gaze. The answer to this question of the gaze appears in the poem “Kant’s Question,” which presents another side of Kant’s fantasy. In this poem, Carson creates a scene in which the fictional Kant is peeping Vitti, who is reduced to the Thing. Kant’s male gaze is challenged as Vitti has already proposed the question of the gaze. Her question signifies her defiance of Kant’s gaze and announces her own existence for herself. The structure of the poem foreshadows the possibility of traversing the phallic fantasy of the Kantian Sublime. The shift of lines marks Kant’s switch of perspective and changes his view of Vitti, who is now regarded as a real person and is able to walk out into the daylight. Both Vitti and Kant identify their sinthome and traverse the fantasy in the end of the poem. After traversing the fantasy of the Kantian/maculine Sublime, walking into “this more difficult dawn” prefigures a possible reading of the feminine Sublime that Carson attempts to achieve in other poems and essay in Decreation, which I will continue to investigate in next chapter.
Chapter 3

The Feminine Subject and the Feminine Sublime

The elucidation of traversing the fantasy of the masculine/Kantian Sublime in Chapter Two enables us to imagine a possible trace of the feminine Sublime in Decreation. In the vein of Lacan’s formulas of sexuation, the masculine/Kantian Sublime falls under the category of the phallic jouissance, whereas the feminine Sublime, I argue, belongs to the dimension of the Other jouissance. In this chapter, I will investigate the presence of the feminine subject as “not all”—both as the phallic subject of Kantian Sublime and the feminine subject of the Other jouissance in “Mia Moglie.” The essay “Decreation” portrays the experience of the Other jouissance in relation to God, and the act of writing the inexpressible jouissance in the kernel of the real brings the self-annihilation due to the death drive. The idea of self-dissolution is not to destroy but to “decreate” the self in the art of writing.

I. The Masculine Structure and the Feminine Structure: Lacan on Sexuality and the Other Jouissance

Having devoted five decades to the study of love, sex, and language, Lacan proposed the formulation of sexual difference in Seminar XX. Unlike Freud’s distinction of sex based on the anatomical structure of body, the Lacanian psychoanalysis suggests that “sexual difference is not the manifestation of a fundamental materiality or an immutable biological difference but a function of one’s position with respect to the Other” (Barnard 9). The subject positions of man and woman are defined on their different relations to the symbolic order, especially the Oedipus complex. As Lacan asserts, the subject’s sexuality is established by way of the phallus. The sexual difference between “having” or “not having the phallus” can
only be imagined in the symbolic order. “It is insofar as the function of man and woman,” Lacan explains in Seminar III, “is symbolized” and “situated in the domain of the symbolic that any normal, completed sexual position is realized” (177). In the dimension of the symbolic, the subject has learned to be a man or a woman from the enigmatic Other and hence his or her subject position is determined. Yet, the realization of a normal sexual position is impossible, since “there is no signifier of sexual difference as such which would permit the subject to fully symbolize the function of man and woman” (Evans 179). In the symbolic order, there is no signifier of sexual difference, as the only sexual signifier, the phallus, “is an empty signifier that stands ultimately for the impossibility of signifying sex” (Barnard 9). Moreover, the phallus as a signifier has no female equivalent or correspondent, which shows “a matter of dissymmetry in the signifier” (Lacan, Seminar III 176). The dissymmetry also marks the lack of harmony between the masculine and the feminine structure, and prefigures Lacan’s bombshell expression of “the impossibility of founding a sexual relationship” (Seminar XX 9). In light of Lacanian psychoanalysis, sexuality is determined not by the anatomical duality or biological factors, but by the subject’s relation to the Other. The Lacanian sexual difference is nothing like the concept of sex or gender in common beliefs, and it discloses the rigid convention of sexual identification that exceeds the existing social definition or determination of sexual position.

Unlike the dominant discourses of sex and gender, Lacan’s formulas of sexual difference points to the subject’s sexual position in relation to the object a. In Seminar XX, he offers a schema that explains the logic of sexuation with respect to how the object a as the cause of the desire determines the subject position:
In this schema, the left part indicates the masculine structure and the right the feminine structure. The second formula on the upper left means that “it is through the phallic function that man as a whole acquires his inscription” (Seminar XX 79). The phallic subject is completely determined by the phallic function and his jouissance is phallic jouissance. The barred subject($) that points toward $a$ (the object $a$) represents the fact that the divided subject is in the endless pursuit of the lost object, thereby failing to attain completeness. As the phallic subject, man can never be satisfied if his satisfaction is in the form of phallic jouissance. Yearning for the phallus, the barred subject is doomed to meet the failure of satisfaction. This is why Fink explains that “phallic jouissance as the jouissance that fails us, that disappoints us. It is susceptible to failure, and it fundamentally misses our partner” (“Knowledge and Jouissance” 37). Situating himself in this condition, the phallic subject “ never deals with anything by way of a partner but object $a$” (Seminar XX 80). His love of the object $a$ forces him to reduce his sexual partner to the object $a$. If he falls in love with a woman, he would immediately associate her with the object $a$, which “occupies the missing partner” for him (Evans 181). As a result, he never sees his sexual partner as a real subject but as the cause of desire. The conjunction of the barred subject and the object $a$ constitutes the matheme of fantasy($\exists a\phi x$), in which the phallic subject’s love for his partner is merely an imaginary illusion. Lacan again alludes to the poems of courtly love, in which a lady is praised as inaccessible object that requests a knight’s infinite love and
devotion. This elevation of woman’s status in these poems only reinforces man’s enigmatic relationship with woman, as this courtship is, from a Lacanian perspective, nothing but the longing for the object a. The phallic subject’s love for a woman occurs “inasmuch as the phallic signifier clearly constitutes her as giving in love what she does not have” (Lacan, Écrits 583). Driven by the object a, the phallic man is never inclined to see his sexual partner as what she is but as the substitution of the object a. In this context, we can understand why Lacan says “when one loves, it has nothing to do with sex” (Seminar XX 25). Thus, Lacan asserts “the whole realization of the sexual relationship leads to fantasy” (Seminar XX 86). The impossibility of sexual relationship marks the status of woman as the fantasy object and points to the barred Woman, which appears in the lower right of the diagram. The barred Woman is Lacan’s shorthand for the concept that “there is no such thing as Woman,” and it is regarded “as being not-whole in situating itself in the phallic function (Seminar XX 72).

The second formula of the feminine structure in the upper right corner means that “not all of her jouissance is phallic jouissance” (Fink, “Knowledge and Jouissance” 39), and indicates that the barred woman is at least in part subject to phallic jouissance that always fails us and some part of her rejects the phallic function. In a sense, the feminine structure is double-sided in Lacan’ formulas of sexuation. Lacan points out that “woman has a relationship with S(A), and it is already in that respect that she is doubled, that she is not-whole, since she can also have a relation with Φ[the phallus]” (Seminar XX 81). The crucial difference between the phallic and the feminine subject lies in the fact that “women do not have to renounce phallic jouissance to have the jouissance: they have the Other jouissance without giving up their phallic jouissance” (Fink, “Knowledge and Jouissance” 40). In a word, the
feminine structure is allowed to experience both phallic jouissance and the Other jouissance.

In the relationship with the phallus (Φ), the feminine subject is, like the phallic subject, always in the illusion of chasing after the object a. From this perspective, we can again find the impossibility of a harmonious sexual relationship in love, since both the phallic and the feminine subject are looking for something in each other more than each other. Sexual relationships, as Lacan suggests, “revolve around a being and a having” the phallus (Écrits 582). For the phallic subject, the feminine subject is “the phallus, that is, the representative of his desire” (Soler, “What Does the Unconscious” 102). In order to satisfy the phallic subject’s desire, the feminine subject enters “the dimension of masquerade,” a process of change from a “not having” (the phallus) to a “being” (the phallus) (Morel 83). The nature of the masquerade is phallic, as it covers the essential part of the femininity and turns the feminine subject into a “phallus-girl” (83). Encountering the phallic man’s desire, the feminine subject “is concerned that she does not posses the object that man sees in her, and thus she constantly wonders what is in her more than herself” (Salecl, “Love Anxieties” 94). This uncertainty in her mind allows her to construct her own frame of fantasy as a response to the enigmatic desire of the Other. Fink points out that the feminine subject is homosexual insofar as “she loves men, she loves like man and her desire is structured in fantasy like his” (The Lacanian Subject 119). From the feminine subject’s perspective, the object a still plays a crucial role in the so-called sexual relationship, and its function makes the phallic desire a dominant place in this impossible relationship.
Apart from her being partially determined by the phallus as a “not-all” in the symbolic order, the feminine subject can experience a “jouissance beyond the phallus” (Lacan, Seminar XX 74). The second formula in the feminine structure indicates:

there is not any that is not phallic jouissance, the emphasis going on the first “is.” All the jouissances that do exist are phallic (in order to exist, according to Lacan, something must be articulable within our signifying system determined by the phallic signifier); but that does not mean there cannot be some jouissance that are not phallic. It is just that they do not exist; instead, they ex-sist. The Other jouissance can only ex-sist, it cannot exist, for to exist it would have to be spoken, articulated, symbolized.” (emphasis original, Fink, Lacan to the Letter 161).

In addition to the experience of phallic jouissance, there is the Other jouissance logically inherent in the feminine structure. The reason why the Other jouissance cannot be spoken is that the necessary condition of being spoken lies in the articulation through signifiers in the symbolic order. The Other jouissance “doesn’t signify anything,” and it is the kind of jouissance that the feminine subject is not aware of until “it comes (arrive)” (italics original, Lacan, Seminar XX 74). In the formulas of sexuation, the Other jouissance indicates the feminine subject’s relation with S(Aₗ), “the signifier of the lack in the Other” (Morel 82). In the diagram, the first formula assumes “her Other partner” as S(Aₗ), whereas the second formula in the feminine structure designates her partnership with the phallus rather than the phallic subject (Fink, The Lacanian Subject 121). With this partner, she makes up for the sexual relationship that does not exist (Morel 82). In a sense, as her partner is no longer the object a, the feminine subject does not have to “relate or accede” to the
object a located under the category of the phallic subject (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* 121). In her relationship with the Other jouissance, this jouissance functions as a kind of “supplementary jouissance” for the barred Woman as “not-whole” (Lacan, *Seminar XX* 73). The nature of supplement in the Other jouissance points to the fact that the feminine subject does not confine herself with the desire for the object a in the hope of being whole again. Free from the limited desire triggered by the object a, the feminine subject experience the Other jouissance without knowing how to articulate it in the symbolic order. Unlike the phallic subject who is driven by the lack, the feminine subject in relation to the S(A̸) discovers the limit of desire as the lack in the Other so that she can enjoy this supplementary jouissance.

The non-articulable experience of the Other jouissance is “a jouissance that is beyond,” and this experience, according to Lacan, can often be found in mysticism (*Seminar XX* 76). The statue of Saint Teresa is the paradigmatic example of the Other jouissance, since it demonstrates “the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it, but know nothing about it” (76). 11 The theme of this sculpture is Teresa’s religious ecstasy in the encounter with an Angel, representing an episode of her spiritual autobiography *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*. For Lacan, what Teresa experiences is “the jouissance of woman insofar as it is extra (en plus)” (*Seminar XX* 77). This excess of feeling in the Other jouissance points to the notion of “ex-sistence,” revealing “the face of God” based on the Other jouissance (77). The word “ex-sistence” is translated from the Greek ekstasis, meaning “standing outside of” or “standing apart from” something, and it also connotes the states of mind of being ecstatic (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* 122). Therefore, the derivative word, ecstasy, has a close relation with the Other jouissance, which is “beyond the symbolic,

11 “The Ecstasy of St. Teresa’ is a marble and gilded bronze niche sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1645-52) located in the Coroanaro Chapel in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome” (*Seminar XX* 76).
standing apart from symbolic castration. It ex-sists” (122). Knowing nothing about the phallus, the Other jouissance “is foreclosed from the symbolic and is outside the unconscious” (Soler, What Lacan Said 40). Elusive to the signifier in the symbolic order, the Other jouissance falls outside the grasp of proposition such as “it is” or “it is not” (Shepherdson 139-40). It is already stated in Lacan’s formula that the barred Woman as “not-whole” cannot be inscribed in the symbolic knowledge (Seminar XX 81), revealing the possibility of the other side of femininity that is incommensurate in terms of the phallic signifier. This disproportion leads us to see the feminine subject occupy the place of the “radically Other” after he explains the close relationship between God and the feminine subject (Seminar XX 83). This radical Other in the feminine structure can not to be confused with the Other as the symbolic order, since the former is based on the Other/feminine jouissance and the latter is the locus of the signifier (Φ). If we imagine the two Others as two intersected circles, what drops out between them is the object a (Fink, “Knowledge and Jouissance” 43), which serves as the fundamental element in the phallic subject’s love while it is excluded from the feminine structure. The disjunction of the faces of the Other restates the notion of the impossibility of sexual relationship as well as the idea that the Other jouissance ex-sists outside the symbolic law.

II. The Feminine Subject of the Other Jouissance in “Mia Moglie” and “Decreation”

Previously discussed in last chapter, the end of the poem “Mia Moglie” presents how Vitti is subject to the superegoic moral law, and she is no doubt the barred Woman chasing the phallus in the hope of finding the primary wholeness. Yet, the structure of the poem invites another subversive way of interpretation, and it allows us to discover the presence of the feminine subject as “not all”— she has not
only the access to phallic jouissance but also the Other jouissance. Throughout the poem, two lines (greener than grass /... dead. / I seem to me) from one of Sappho’s poems, “Fragment 31,” is scattered and each word in inserted between every couple of lines. Before I begin my analysis of this poem, we should first read the intriguing structure of this poem:

A caught woman is something the movies want to believe in.

“For instance, Sappho,” as Longinus say.

    greener

Caught from within, she has somehow got the Sublime inside her.

“As though these could combine and form one body”

    than

Her body vibrates, she is always cold, there is a certain
cold industrial noise, she is also hot, has stuck a thermometer

    grass

under her arm and forgotten it and at the wall she turns glistening,
aghast: your prey. “Are you not amazed?”

    and

In sex she cluster herself on the man’s body as if hit by a wind.

“For she is terrified.”

    dead

On the street she pulls herself along, to get there will be worse.

“For she is all but dying”

    almost

The husband speaks of her time in the clinic, her accident.

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12 Sappho (early sixth century B.C.) is a Greek female poet, who lives on the island of Lesbos. Her poems often express her affection for women, and thus are associated with homosexuality.
“Not one passion in her but a synod of passions”

I

In the clinic she met a girl whose problem was she wanted everything. Bolts of everything hit the table.

seem

Now she is well says of this girl who has turned out to be herself. “Sublimity is the echo of a great soul.”

to me

What is that antenna for? She asks a man. To listen to the noise of stars—“as I believe I said,” Longinus adds. (67-68)

This poem consists of two parts: several unrhymed couplets and two lines from one of Sappho’s poem, and it demonstrates the representation of the feminine structure under the two categories of phallic jouissance and the Other jouissance, respectively in the unrhymed couplets and in the inserted poems by Sappho. It is obvious that the part of unrhymed couplets depicts the fantasy of the Kantian Sublime, especially in the end of this poem, where, as discusses in previous chapter, we find Vitti is paying attention to the function of the antenna, which represents the Kantian Sublime object. It is obvious that we can associate Vitti’s terror (“For she is terrified”) (67) and her feeling of impending death (“For she is all but dying”) (68) with the subject of the Kantian Sublime, a neurotic who wants everything under the superegoic imperative. Driven by the object a, Vitti enjoys everything as the phallic subject does, in the hope of acquiring the sense of wholeness again. In a sense, I venture to say that the subject of the Kantian Sublime falls under the category of the phallic jouissance, which “is always at fault and prepared to entertain the superego’s imperative: ‘always wants more’” (Soler, “Hysteria” 50). In addition to being the subject of the Kantian Sublime,
Vitti is, in the very beginning of this poem, depicted as “a caught woman” (67), caught in the movie screen upon which men projects their fantasy. In light of the formulas of Lacan’s sexuation, she is, in my opinion, the fantasy object and is reduced to the object $a$ by the phallic subject. Treated not as a real person, Vitti appears to be sick and her body is trembling from the alternation between being cold and hot. Carson is even asking her readers or movie audience the question: “Are you not amazed” that Vitti has become “your prey” (67), which undoubtedly points to Vitti as the object $a$ of the male gaze in the dimension of phallic jouissance.

In addition to the Kantian Sublime, as Carson wants us to see it in the beginning of the poem, the Longinian Sublime is also under the category of the phallic subject. Carson quotes and slightly changes Lonigus’ comment on Sappho’s “Fragment 31”: “As though these [senses] could combine and form one body” (67). In *On the Sublime*, Longinus praises Sappho’s ability to describe the details of lovers’ diverse senses and combine them in a unity, which is a superb technique in the Sublime writing. Yet, Freeman points out that Longinus’s comment reflects his “illusion of wholeness,” while “the lyrics describe an experience of total fragmentation” (13). Longinus’ insistence of an organic yet illusionary whole in the effect of the Sublime points to the formation of the phallic subject in the phase of the mirror stage. Sappho’s poem, “Fragment 31,” plays a decisive role in his theorization of the discourse of the Sublime, and Longinus’ analysis of her poem puts his book in line with the Kantian Sublime if in the vein of Lacan’s sexuation.

13 The original text from *On the Sublime*: “the selection of the most striking of them and their combination into a single whole that has produced the singular excellence of the passage” (Longinus 71).
To undermine the structure of the Kantian Sublime, Carson inserts Sappho’s poem between lines of unrhymed couplets, and the fragments of Sappho’s poem points to the feminine subject as “not-all:” in addition to representing the phallic subject of the masculine/Kantian Sublime under the category of the phallus, she also exists as the feminine subject of the self-sufficient Other jouissance. Before we look into “Mia Moglie”, we have to see how Carson discusses the feminine subject in “Fragment 31” in the essay “Decreation: How Women like Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil Tell God” (hereafter “Decreation”) which consists of four sections on how each woman interprets their understanding of God. In “Part One” of this essay, Cason begins with “Fragment 31” and suggests that the end of the poem brings us a spiritual moment:

He seems to me equal to gods that man
whoever he is who opposite you
sits and listen close
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing— oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, even a moment, on speaking
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

and sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead—or almost
I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty... (emphasis added, 159)

This poem seems to stage “a scenario inside the little theatre of her [Sappho’s] mind”, as Carson suggests (160), and it forms an erotic triangle of a girl, the godlike man and Sappho. There is an apparent shift of focus from the tension in the triangular relationship to the poetic persona’s perception, along with the subsequent dysfunction of her “perceptual abilities (visual, aural, tactile)”(160). In the very end of the poem, the shift highlights the “her own Being: ‘I am’ ” when she says “greener than grass I am” (161). This is a moment of “spiritual event,” Carson points out, as Sappho “enters into ecstasy” (161). Here Carson explains the root meaning of ecstasy: “standing outside oneself,” a condition that the Greeks find in the mad, the gifted and lovers (161). Moreover, Carson asserts that “ecstasy changes Sappho and changes her poem” because of the near-death experience in the end of the poem where her Being is thrown outside the center of the self as she sees herself as grass or a dead person (161). Carson compares the first stanza of this poem to a dance of jealousy, and Sappho herself does not participate as dancing partner because of her departure from the center of the self in the end of the poem (160-1). This is a spiritual event that points to Sappho’s ecstatic state, yet Carson seems to be self-contradictory by saying that this poem is not about ecstasy; then, again in the end of “Part One,” she asserts that the very last line of “Fragment 31” “leads us back to her ecstatic condition” (162).

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14 This is Carson’s own version of translation of “Fragment 31”, which is also offered in Carson’s If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho.
Carson’s self-contradiction reaffirms the ecstatic condition as the theme of Sappho’s “Fragment 31.” Now let’s see the powerful line that sways Carson’s interpretation about this poem: “But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty. . .” (159). The keywords of this line are the Greek words “pan tolmaton,” meaning “all is to be dared” (162). Because of “a mood of possibility or potential” in those Greek words, Carson assumes that Sappho is asking us “a deeper spiritual question: What is it that love dares the self to do” (162, italics original). In a state of ecstasy, Carson implies, the subject will answer: “Love dares the self to leave itself behind, to enter into poverty” (162). Like Sappho, Carson’s essay seems to break off with puzzling words, and Carson does not explain how the ecstatic state is related to poverty.

The condition of ecstasy, I would like to argue, brings the subject “the poverty” of words and the subject experiences an annihilation of signification (162). It is worthy of noticing that “the poverty” of words has already appeared before the end of this poem. In the beginning of “Fragment 31,” Sappho seems to be jealous of the man who sits next to a girl, and, as the poem unfolds, she cannot express herself in words when looking at the girl (“no speaking/ is left in me”) (161). Yet, Carson asserts that Sappho does not join the dance of jealousy, which shows that Sappho is neither jealous of man nor smitten with the girl. To explain this situation, Carson only points out that Sappho shifts her focus from the dance of jealousy to her own Being in the condition of ecstasy. In my opinion, Sappho’s absence in the dance of jealousy demonstrates that she is not a subject of phallic jouissance always in the hope of searching the object a, so Sappho does not regard the girl as the cause of her desire, not to mention the godlike man. In the rapturous condition, Sappho is heading in the direction of the Other jouissance, which indicates that “a woman takes pleasure in herself as [the] Other to herself” (André 248). In other words, Sappho finds a path of
pleasure toward her own being as the Other, and enters the state of ecstasy. She does not need a partner as the object *a* to acquire the Other *jouissance*. The ecstatic condition Carson describes, I argue, may be interpreted in the vein of Lacan’s formulas of sexuation, and we would discover that Sappho’s ecstasy is very similar to Lacan’s notion of the Other *jouissance*, which points to a subject standing outside the symbolic order and symbolic castration. Although we can perceive a place for the Other *jouissance* within the symbolic system, its condition remains inexpressible and ineffable (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* 122). As Carson suggests, if the ecstatic feminine subject leaves the self behind in order to enter into the status of “poverty” (162), I argue that what she experiences is outside the symbolic order. This ecstatic subject in Sappho’s “Fragment 31” is undoubtedly a Lacanian feminine subject of the Other *jouissance*.

With the establishment of the subject of the Other *jouissance* in “Fragment 31” in the vein of Lacan’s formulas of sexuation, it is easier for us to detect the change of the subject position of the feminine subject in the poem “Mia Moglie”. The presentation of the poem, similar to “Kant’s Question”, alternates between lines of the unrhymed couplets and italicized lines of Sappho’s “Fragment 31,” and it indicates “a change of discourse” of the feminine subject as “not all”—“a change of discourse” from the subject under the control of the phallus to the subject with the Other *jouissance* (Lacan, *Seminar XX* 16). Lacan defines discourse as “a social link, founded on language (17), and thus the “change of discourse” suggests a change of language. The alternation between Carson’s rewriting of the script of “Red Dessert” and Sappho’s “Fragment 31” presents two different modes of language; the former remains readable sentences while the latter presents fragments of words by singling
out one word in each italicized line. This poetic effect of this arrangement highlights the feminine subject position as “not-all.”

In the intriguing structure of “Mia Moglie,” the way Carson inserts every word from lines of “Fragment 31” creates an effect that the italicized lines seem to cross out or deny the presence of unrhymed couplets in an attempt to challenge the Kantian Sublime. To subvert the structure of the Kantian Sublime, Carson deliberately misses two important words “I am” in “Mia Moglie” (68). In “Fragment 31,” the original line goes “. . . greener than grass/ I am and dead— or almost/I seem to me” (emphasis added,159). I’ve pointed out that these lines suggests the ecstatic condition of feminine jouissance, and that “I am” disappears in “Mia Moglie” points to the ineffable place of the feminine subject in the symbolic order, an existence standing outside the symbolic order. Being unable to be captured by the symbolic language, the experience of self-erasure establishes a counter-position against the Kantian Sublime represented in the unrhymed couplets. The loss of the subjectivity presents an experience that escapes signifying practices and the disappearance of the self bears the traces of the self-dissolution in the experience of the feminine Sublime, and continues to the theme in the essay “Decreation. ”

III. The Feminine Sublime: The Self-annihilation

Not articulable in speech, feminine jouissance occupies a place outside a body of language, through which women might escape (Rose 56). Throughout Seminar XX, Lacan restates the enigmatic nature of the Other jouissacne, and posits the Other jouissance as “an indeterminate existence” (Seminar XX 103) for being not articulable in speech. It is not, Lacan claims, accessible for every woman; not all women experience it (Fink, Lacan to the Letter 163). These unknowable experiences
are associated the mystical experiences, especially with God. That Lacan defines feminine jouissance as an inarticulable experience leaves his readers to wonder what can be said about it, since it escapes signifying practices. In the essay “Decreation, Carson attempts to demonstrate that the act of writing the Other jouissance in the experience with God brings the annihilation of the self.

In the essay “Decreation,” Carson brings the fourteenth-century mystic Marguerite Porete and twentieth-century mystic Simon Weil into relation with the poet Sappho. As female writers and Christian mystics, Porete and Weil “all wrote of divine love,” Roth comments, “and they all wondered how they could describe the nature of this love so intense, so sublime, that it annihilates” (164). What is annihilated in the Sublime experience? Pollock asserts that the essay “Decreation” is about “displacing the self to make way for the sublime” (7). Throughout the essay “Decreation,” the annihilation of the self or the disintegration of the self is presented in Porete’s and Weil’s writing on the ecstatic relationship with God. Both of them experience the Other jouissance, while the rapturous experience brings the dissolution of the self. How does the annihilation of the self occur in the experience of the feminine Sublime? We have to first investigate the ecstatic yet inarticulable condition in Porete and Weil’s relationship with God.

Carson establishes the link between Sappho and Porete with the condition of ecstasy in which “the soul is carried outside her own Being and leaves herself behind” (163). In her relationship with God, Porete as a feminine subject experiences the Other jouissance, “a jouissance of love,” which Lacan relates to “religious ecstasy

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5 Marguerite Porete was a French Christian mystics and an author of The Mirror of Simple Souls, a mystical treatise on divine love. She was burned at the stake in Paris in the early fourteenth century for heresy after a long trial conducted by papal inquisitors. Simone Weil (1909-1943) was a French philosopher and a Christian mystic.
and to a kind of bodily, corporeal jouissance that is not localized in the genitals the way phallic jouissance is.” (Fink, the Lacanian Subject 120). The bodily jouissance in Porete’s ecstatic condition occurs at the moment “when God’s abundance overflows her,” and leaves her “in the abyss of absolute poverty” (164). Porete recognizes this condition of poverty as “amazing and inexpressible kind of repletion,” referring to God as “overflowing and abundant Lover or as the Spouse of my youth” (164). Porete develops an ecstatic relationship with God and “experience feminine jouissacance simply by herself” (Salecl, “Silence” 190). In the essay “Decreation,” Porete and Weil’s writing on divine love echoes Lacan’s attempt to explicate that the inarticulable experience of the Other jouissance emerges from “another satisfaction,’ the satisfaction of speech” (Lacan, Seminar XX 64), because “to speak of love,” Lacan says, “is itself a jouissance” (83). In writing of her relationship with God, Perete and Weil then reach “a kind of sublimation that provided its own pleasure” (Fink, “Knowledge and Jouissance” 40). To speak or to write the inexpressible experience of feminine jouissance is, as Lacan says, “speech of satisfaction” (Seminar XX 64), but this satisfaction belongs to the domain of phallic jouissance. In other words, the act of writing the mythical experience of feminine jouissance restates the feminine subject as “not-all”— she can enjoy feminine jouissance while accepting phallic jouissance in the symbolic order.

In Porete and Weil’s ecstatic experience with God, Carson points out what Lacan does not say in the Other jouissance: to talk or to write about the Other jouissance brings the disintegration of the self. In this self-sufficient jouissance, Porete experiences the self-disintegration as a subject, as Carson points out that there is “an unusual triangle consisting of God, Marguerite and Marguerite” (164).“Marguerite feels her self pulled apart from itself and thrown into a condition of
poverty,” which, Carson suggests, creates the same ecstatic effect that we encounter in Sappho’s poem (164). In addition to the self-disintegration, Carson also points out that this ecstatic effect exposes “her very own Being” to the self-annihilation and “to dislodge it from the center of itself” (165). Only by decentering herself can she find “a path that leads to God” (165). Carson continues to this discussion of self-annihilation in “Part Three,” where we find the key word for the title of this essay and this book: “decreation” (167). This is Simone Weil’s coined word for “getting the self out the way,” and her aim, like Porete’s, is to express “a need to render back to God what God has given to her, that is, the self” (167).

Carson associates self-annihilation in the experience with God throughout the essay “Decreation,” but Christian theology is not Carson’s central issue in her search of the feminine Sublime. Instead, the art of writing is the main focus of the essay “Decreation,” as Carson writes “to be a writer is to construct a big, loud, shiny center of self from which the writing is given voice and any claim to be intent on annihilating this self while still continuing to write and give voice to writing, must involve the writer in some important acts of subterfuge or contradiction” (171). The act of writing, Carson believes, is double-sided, since it involves construction and annihilation of the self. The latter is obviously Carson’s focus in the essay “Decreation,” as the annihilation of the self is closely linked to the ecstatic experience with God. When the feminine subject attempts to verbalize the ecstatic yet inarticulable the Other jouissance, the death drive leads to the dissolution the self in the symbolic order.

Although Lacan does not clearly associate the Other jouissance with the real, the description of it (ex-sistence outside the symbolic) points to the locus of the unpresentable dimension that resists symbolization, one of various references to the
characteristics of the real. As previously discussed in Chapter One, *das Ding* in the
dimension of the real cannot be represented by any signifier and therefore remains
outside the signifying chain. The emptiness at the center of the real is represented as a
“*nihil* [nothing]” in the symbolic order (emphasis original, Lacan, *Ethics* 121). The
impulsive attempt to approach the boundary of *das Ding* in the real is the death drive.

In the domain of the symbolic language, *das Ding* is represented as the “*nihil,*” the
void, around which the symbolic is constructed; something beyond and at the point of
origin of the signifying chain is projected onto the field of the Thing (*Ethics* 121; 214).
The locus of *das Ding* indicates the necessary condition of creation of the signifier:
“*ex nihilo* [out of nothing]” (italics original, *Ethics* 121). This means that the empty
center of *das Ding* is not only the place where the symbolic language is blocked out
but also the locus where the symbolic is created. Circling around the edge of *das Ding*
in the real, the death drive is “articulated at a level that can only be defined as a
function of the signifying chain” (*Ethics* 211). That is to say, the death drive can only
be conceived in the symbolic order. Although the death drive is articulated “as a
destruction drive, given that it challenges everything that exists,” “it is also a will to
create from zero, a will to begin again” (*Ethics* 212). Lacan suggests that it is in the
domain of signifying chain that the death drive beings to create out of nothing, as he
puts it “Production. . . is a domain of creation *ex nihilo*” (*Ethics* 214).

Both Porete and Weil write about the mythical experiences with God, and
their act of writing these inarticulable experiences is an attempt to reach the kernel of
the real. When they reach the edge of the real by writing or in prayers, the death drive
threatens to annihilate the self. As Weil describes the self in the ecstatic and joyful
condition, “no corner is left for saying I” (77). Porete “feels herself to be an obstacle
to herself inwardly” (167), and she can refuse this authorization of individual
existence through God (167). If the death drive threatens to destroy the self, it also points to the (re)creation of it in the symbolic order. This logic of death drive echoes the aim of the key word “decreation:” “to undo the creature in us” (167). The purpose of “deacreation” is not simply to obliterate the self but also to liberate the self, as Roth comments “getting the self out of the way allows one to lose one’s hole on meaning so as to open up other path of significance” (158). Carson calls the possibility of creation “dream distance,” in which “the self is displaced from the center of the work and teller disappears into the telling” (173).

Carson employs one of Sappho’s poems as an example of the “dream distance in which a writer tells God” [sic], and this type of hymn is called “kletic, a calling hymn, an invocation to God to come from where she is to where we are (emphasis added, 178).” The function of such a hymn, Carson suggests, is to “decreate” (178). The act of summoning indicates the writer’s call for help, and implies that the process of decreation begins with a depressing struggle before the occurrence of self-annihilation. Carson points out that Porete encounters a similar situation, as she “reaches rockbottom” by realizing that her love is the only obstacle in the path toward God (166). God’s absence plays a crucial role in Carson’s “ecstatic” writing; she quotes one of Weil’s comment that “God can only be present in creation under the form of absence” (Gravity 37). When God’s absence is painfully felt in the process of decreation, God is already there in the work of art. For a writer who summons God for inspiration, it seems to be impossible to “tell” God’s complex absence (and presence), yet it is only in writing that God as “the FarNear” (le Loingrés) is possible, which is Porete’s unusual formulation. (176;179). When Porete experiences God’s FarNearness, Carson suggests, the self is disclosed and “divine peace” flows in upon her like “glorious food” (176). This is a moment of annihilation of the self after
Porète encounters the absence of the divine Being. In the process of invocation, there is no clear distinction between God’s absence and arrival, as inspiration given by God’s absence comes through a writer’s mind so quickly that a writer is not aware of God’s arrival. Carson suggests that the last verse of Sappho’s hymn brings the presence of Aphrodite by ending with the word “pour” (179). The effect of this word creates uncanny “suspension:” “as if the whole creation is depicted waiting for an action that is already perpetually here” (emphasis original, 179). This suspension pre-echoes Weil’s remarks on decreation, as it invites us to imagine God’s instantaneity as an effect of invocation. Divine Being as a trigger for artistic creation appears to be a “dazzling drop that suddenly, impossibly, saturates the world (179). Carson captures the moments of inspiration flowing over a writer’s mind and compares it to a drop out of pouring nectar, in which the self is suddenly dissolved and acquires the power of decreation.

“Gnosticism I” is one of the attempts to describe the process of “decreation” (167). In this poem, we can see that Carson carries out the idea of “decreation” by making allusions to the three female writers, Sappho, Porète and Weil:

Heaven’s lip! I dreamed
of a page in a book containing the word bird and I
entered bird.
Bird grinds on,

grinds on, thrusting against black. Thrusting
wings, thrusting again, hard
Banks slap against it either side, that bird was exhausted.

Still, beating, working its way and below in dark woods
small creatures
leap. Rip

at food with scrawny lips
Lips at night.
Nothing guiding it, bird beats on, night wetness on it.
A lion looks up.
Smell of adolescence in these creatures, this ordinary
night for them. Astonishment

inside me like a separate person,
sweat-soaked. How to grip.
For some people a bird sings, feather shine. I just get this this.
(italics original, 87)

The poem begins with an erotic presentation of a relationship with God: “Heaven’s lips” (87). The image of the enormous lips high up in the sky depicts a moment of “kletic” hymn, an invocation to God, similar to how Sappho begins her prayer as we have discussed above. The “I” is waiting hopefully for God’s arrival so that s/he can be inspired. The dream, in which the self or the “I” is dissolved in an attempt to enter the word “bird,” points to the process of “decreation,” as Carson attempts to show how “poems are born from inchoate process: ‘thrusting against black’” (Dinsey 30). The movement of the bird-I illustrates the difficulty of this process, as it effortfully repeats the thrusting even if it feels “exhausted” (87). In the night of nothingness, the bird-I rips at food with “scrawny lips” (87). The lean lips points to What Carson describes Weil’s “eating problem” in the essay “Decreation.” A “dream distance” can help her enjoy food by looking at it (175). Weil keeps food near or at a distance through a mythical paradox that echoes Porete’s FarNearness, “where desire need not
end in perishing,” and she is “always uneasy about her imaginative relationship” to food and her love for God. The scrawniness of the lips implies the uncertainty of a writer observing or waiting at and amongst the “dream distance” required for the process of decreation (175). God’s FarNearness in relation to a writer’s inspiration is associated with the sensibility of human hunger in this poem. This association invites us to see that the notion of “decreation” is a matter of desire for “food” that will satisfy the hunger of a writer’s mind.

The line “Nothing is guiding it” indicates that the process of decreation begins with the absence of divine Being or the lack of food. The bird-I “beats on” and is waiting for the moment of inspiration (87). Then the divine Being arrives and fills the bird-I with “astonishment inside me like a separate person” (87). The arrival of God brings not only inspiration but also the disintegration of the self, making the bird-I “sweat-soaked” (87). The process of decreation is not easy, and most of the time writers are uncertain or even helpless, as the question “How to grip” shows their doubts in waiting and capturing the inspiration given by divine Being. The poem also ends in a rather unconfident tone: “For some people a bird sings, feathers shine. I just get this this” (italics original, 87). Some people might acquire their inspiration from the beautiful singing or the colorful appearance of a bird, but, for the bird-I, s/he has “this” poem that demonstrates the process of decreation, where the bird-I awaits the possible inspiration in the process of summoning God. With this poem, Carson illustrates the notion of decreation, which is not all positive and encouraging in the process of writing but full of struggling and doubts. In contrast with to the long scholarship of the masculine Sublime, in which the subject dominates over other objects with a sense of elevation of the self, the feminine Sublime in Carson’s work shows the total annihilation of the self and that the process of self-decreation is full
uncertainty or even suffering. If the subject of the masculine/Kantian Sublime feels negative pleasure, the subject of the feminine Sublime in Carson’s Decreation experience nothing but self-struggling and self-questioning.

This reading of the poem “Mia Milgole” and the essay “Decreation” from the perspective of Lacanian feminine sexuality allows us to define the feminine sublime in contrast to the phallic subject of the Kantian Sublime. Carson points out a special condition of self-annihilation in the experience of the Other jouissance, which Lacan defines as inarticulable. Writing or talking about the Other jouissance is a deadly search toward the core of the real and therefore brings the dissolution of the self. The disintegration of the self illustrates the notion of “decreation,” opening a path toward the possibility of creation. Carson carries out this destructive yet productive “decreation” in her writing throughout the entire book, getting her self out of the way so that we can see her “decreativity.”
Conclusion

In search of a Sublime experience in the essay “Foam,” Carson leads us to explore the history of the Sublime from Longinus, Burke, Kant to the current feature of the feminine Sublime: the disintegration of the self. In addition to the significant similarity between Carson’s view on the sublime and the discourse of the feminine Sublime, Carson also follows the some feminist Sublime critics to counterpose the masculine/Kantian Sublime, a point that has long been neglected by Carson’s critics. By way of the psychoanalytical approach, this reading of “Ode to the Sublime” allows us to investigate the result of experiencing the Kantian Sublime: the fantasy of a neurotic subject who wants everything. In “Kant’s Question,” Carson invites us to reconsider the issues of the gaze of the Kantian subject, and the structure of the poem prefigures the possibility of traversing the fantasy of the Kantian Sublime. Through Lacan’s formula of sexuation, the subject of the Kantian subject is regarded under the control of the phallus and therefore in the dimension of phallic jouissance. The poem “Mia Moglie” exemplifies the presence of the feminine subject as “not all”—both as the subject of the Kantian Sublime and the subject of the Other jouissance. Carson’s representation of the Other jouissance echoes Lacan’s interpretation of mythical experience of God: an condition of inexplicable ecstasy. Unlike Lacan’s dismissing the experience with God as inarticulable, she leads us to discover that writing the ecstatic experiences often brings a sense of the self-annihilation, a result of attempting to reach the kernel of the real surrounded by the death drive. The function of the death drive brings not only obliteration but also reconstruction in the symbolic, and this reading reflects the title of the essay and the book “Decreation.” By depicting a process of decreation of the self as struggling and uncertain in “Gnosticism I,” Carson provides an alternative side of the feminine Sublime in the experience of the self-
dissolution. In Carson’s representation of the history of the Sublime, we can see that she not only challenges the masculine Sublime, which stresses the supremacy of the self over other objects, but also attempts to add different perspective to the discourse of the feminine Sublime, making the notion of the self-annihilation more subversive.

Reading Decreation through a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens provides us with a way to unveil Carson’s attempt to destabilize the notion of the Sublime. Yet, this approach has its limit, as we can see that the experience of self-struggling in the process of the self-annihilation cannot be interpreted in the vein of the Lacan’s theory. The moment of the painful self-annihilation, as Carson invites us to see, can be traced back to Sappho’s time (early sixth century B.C.) and can be found in the work of many other writers. In the description of writer’s waiting for inspiration from Divine Being, Carson’s statement of the self-annihilation may seem to be rather conventional, but her attempt of combining the notion of the feminine Sublime and the experience of the self-struggling brings forth a new perspective in the discourse of the feminine Sublime. It is one of Carson’s strength of creating new and intriguing views by revisiting the ancient Greek literature or other literary works that brings the pleasure and excitement of reading Decreation. Carson’s investigation of the history of the Sublime demonstrates her ability to sieve through the canonical works and presents her insightful interpretation. In addition, readers can also be enthralled by the structural and generic diversity in Decreation. In an interview, she quotes from Gertrude Stein: “act like there is no use in a center” (qtd. in Aitken 22), which echoes the theme of the self-dispersal as well as the lack of structural center in Decreation. In the examination of the notion of the Sublime, Carson shows her “decreation” by not only emptying the center of the structure of the book but also vacating the presence of the self. The thesis ends with Carson’s definition of the self-obliteration, yet the
search for the feminine Sublime heralds a larger project in the future, in which an extensive reading of Carson’s other works may shed light on our exploration of the discourse of the feminine Sublime.
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1914.


