

# Reflections on Boredom and the Sublime

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Some of the more or less philosophical reflections in the present paper may be confirmed by ordinary cases of boredom. One is 'bored to tears', 'bored to extinction'. The former is possibly comic, or hysterical. The latter may touch on the sublime. One excludes golf bores, football bores and such small fry, but serious bores, bores who bore on serious occasions, sermons, graduation-day speeches, orations in Parliament, may even be savoured. I once knew a Vice Chancellor more than commonly boring whom one could roll cautiously around one's palate like a doubtful wine. But bores, serious ones on occasions as serious, in the end lose their flavour and fire up the Kantian sublime-and-human-dignity-apparatus in a non-aesthetic, putatively-ethical mode. We rebel: 'What right has this person to my valuable time and attention?' The dignity of personhood can be roused up by bores who trespass on it.

If we do not rebel, we remove our attention, or deliberately deflect the onslaught. Real bores drive us on into reverie, or fantasies of custard-pie throwing and other baroque revenges. These fantasies, though comic, are not, perhaps, properly aesthetic. So one's reactions to someone else's being boring in a big way remain more an ethical matter than an aesthetic one. But when the revenge is satirical parody of the bore, then one's response may become genuinely aesthetic. Lucky Jim's account of the 'Merrie England' lecture is authentic comedy. The high satire of Pope's *Dunciad* is art of a most splendid kind.

The boring-sublime is analogous to the ethical-comic-of-ennui in that it is a reaction against a kind of proffered emptiness. It fills the 'nothing' with those aesthetic ideas to which we resort to assert human presence, a presence which we bring with us, and cannot, on the occasion, easily remove from the 'empty' experience.

The late Sir Herbert Read remarked at a seminar on abstraction in art: 'Irish strap-work illuminations such as one finds in *The Book of Kells* are sheep hurdles put up as draughty shelters from the cold winds of eternity and nothingness'. The abstract in art can either shield us against nothingness, as in Read's example, or it can enact nothingness, as I argue in this essay that, for example, Barnett

Newman's mature paintings do, in one way, and Guston's late paintings do in another, different, way. Read's point and the argument of the present paper can possibly be read dialectically, for it is by feeling the wind that one feels the need for shelter. Art can be both. Perhaps even both at once.<sup>1</sup>

This paper cites three eighteenth-century 'internal epigraphs', a nineteenth-century poetic example, and a set of twentieth-century examples from painting. It closes with an eighteenth-century image of the Beatific Vision, a 'boring' icon of that which itself cannot but forever fascinate and feed the soul. The first eighteenth-century fragment is from Edmund Burke:

It gives me pleasure to see nature in ... great but terrible scenes. It fills the mind with grand ideas, and turns the soul in upon itself.<sup>2</sup>

I will be concerned more with 'the soul turned in upon itself' than with 'grand ideas', though the implied distinction may be less than absolute since, so turned, the soul, at least the embodied soul, isolated, reaches, for want of others, for aesthetic ideas. It cannot, yet, contemplate itself directly; and it certainly cannot contemplate God, its ultimate object; so it must exercise itself in aesthetic ideas.

The second eighteenth-century fragment is from the Abbé du Bos, and anticipates my discussion of boredom:

The soul hath its wants no less than the body and one of the greatest wants of man is to have his mind incessantly occupied. The heaviness which quickly attends the inactivity of the mind, is a situation so very disagreeable to man, that he frequently chuses to expose himself to the most painful exercises, rather than be troubled with it.

The third fragment is from John Baillie's *Essay on The Sublime*:

... whatever the essence of the soul may be, it is the Reflexions arising from Sensations only which makes her acquainted with Herself and know her Faculties. Vast objects occasion vast sensations, and vast sensations, give the mind a higher Idea of her own powers.<sup>3</sup>

Is 'the mind turned in upon itself' very powerful, or is it, so turned, needful of *divertissements* as Du Bos is suggesting? How bored can a soul be without being in distress? Vast ideas may, in a sublime way, overwhelm the soul. Does the deprivation of sensations and ideas leave it with either nearly nothing, or just itself? If the latter, how is this to be taken?

My friend Jacques Delaruelle offered me the phrase, 'The boundlessness of boredom'. This paper will not do justice to that whole vast waste, though its central notion might be 'The boredom of boundlessness'.

Kant's model of the sublime underlies this paper. This is the notion that sublime phenomena first cast us down, so that we can then be raised up by the dignity of the Ideas of Reason, or by the value of humanity instanced in ourselves. The phenomenology of the paper follows an idea of privation to be found in Burke. Passing reference will be made to a Neo-Thomist aesthetic which by-passes the sublime, by seeing in high aesthetic experience a reflected view of the human soul. This would trump both Burke's and Kant's sublimities by asserting that there is indeed an acquaintance of the soul with itself. All that this paper aims to add to the Kantian and the Burkean is a notion of boredom, which helps us to 'take' the dark and empty, before the soul fills it with human presence, with the natural or cultural content which such presence brings along with it, and so sublimates it by flooding it with aesthetic ideas.

The paper has its roots in two things beyond its 'epigraphs': a text, and a rough and ready phenomenology. The text is J.-F. Lyotard's 'The sublime and the *avant garde*'.<sup>4</sup> The phenomenology is based on personal experiences of kinds of boredom, and will be taken *ambulando*. The thesis is that the kinds of boredom in question are ways into the sublime. They are perhaps ways when 'great ideas' are so unstated that the soul 'turns in upon itself'.

Renaissance, Neo-classical and romantic painting are full of great ideas. Abstract painting, the mode of our century, at first look seems to avoid 'ideas'. Our concern will be with the play of avoidance of ideas against an authorial offer of a superabundance of them, which is so characteristic of Abstract Expressionism. We may divide abstract painting, tentatively, into two branches: the beautiful and the sublime. Beautiful abstract paintings are 'authorised' by a passage in Plato's *Philebus*<sup>5</sup> which talks about the potential or actual beauty of pure shapes in themselves. These beautiful abstracts are not our concern here. Sublime abstract paintings seem a little more complicated to explain than beautiful ones. My suggestion is that they turn on two points: the familiar Burkean one about privation-just-avoided or privation-imaged being a necessary, even a necessary and sufficient, cause for the sublime; second, the point that abstract paintings, qua abstract, cannot suggest great ideas pictorially (since they picture nothing), and seem to suggest ideas, if at all, only indirectly, by way of authorially authorised or cultural glossing. The possibility that they invite or resist certain particular glosses will for now be left open.

We may usefully look at a quotation from Lyotard; his essay is a

response to Barnett Newman's paintings in general, and specifically Newman's 1948 written piece, 'The Sublime Is Now'.<sup>6</sup> It is a very Burkean slice of Lyotard, whose topic is the sublime as terror-by-deprivation.

Terrors are linked to privation of light: terror of darkness; privation of others: terror of solitude; privation of language: terror of silence; privation of objects: terror of emptiness; privation of life: terror of death. What is terrifying is that the it happens that will stop happening.<sup>7</sup>

If the *it happens that* stops happening, then everything stops: nothing (any longer) *is*.

Earlier in the essay Lyotard writes:

Now, and here, there is this painting, *where there might have been nothing at all*, and that's what is sublime.<sup>8</sup>

This resonates with Leibniz's ultimate question, 'Why should there be something rather than nothing?' perhaps a shade too grandly. The suggestion is that 'this painting' is all that stands between us and the largest possible nothing. My aim is to turn this odd suggestion round, make a point that can be of use to those of us who, like Lyotard, enjoy Newman's paintings. It would then read like this: in a pre-abstract sublime painting, for example *Dunstanborough Castle... Sunrise after a Squally Night* by Turner (Plate I),<sup>9</sup> certain situations of terror-by-privation are imaged. But a Barnett Newman, for example *Onement I* (Plate II),<sup>10</sup> is a privation: it does not image but constitutes a kind of privation. And thus it confronts us.

How does *Onement I* constitute a privation? Let us look at it from the philistine point of view: 'There's nothing in the picture'; 'It does not offer what pictures usually offer!'; 'It's empty'. We should try this incomprehension, for a moment at least. If a Newman canvas does not offer obvious content, neither does it—at once—present itself as a beautiful abstract, licensed by the *Philebus*: let us then take in the painting in its negativity. There is in a Newman at once a great presence of sensory elements, an avoidance of 'attractive' design, and an absence of 'grand ideas'. There seem to be no ideas at all.<sup>11</sup>

Three ways are commonly taken to deal with this situation: one concentrates on Newman's facture, his 'pure painting', revelling in his colour; or one fits him—if subliminally—into the history of modern painting, itself the history of the deconstruction of the very visual language in which 'grand ideas' were accustomed to be put. All of us here can do these exercises in art appreciation. The third

way of dealing with the enigma of a Newman work is to begin, at once, (a) to load it with such of one's own cultural baggage as it seems apt to carry, or (b) to invest it with the doctrines to be found in Newman's essays. (Or do both things at the same time, by way of the summoning up of aesthetic ideas.) My suggestion is that between the first and second ways on one hand and the third on the other, we heed, for a moment, what the philistine is telling us. For in a sense it is true, what he says: 'There's nothing in it'. If there is nothing in *Onement I*, then it is at once a privation and—fairly quickly—a bore, so: be, a moment, bored! Be dumb, and slow. Then, and only then, be clever.

It is the moment of arrest before the *enacted nothing* of the Newman canvas which constitutes the real reaction to the work, a reaction which we must have before we go on with the business of the work's intensionalities. The quest for intensionalities is a second reaction to our own first reaction—a reflection after a Lyotardian shock: a *contre coup* of the mind.<sup>12</sup> The twinge of *ennui* both precedes and is a condition of the assertion of human subjectivity itself, and the cash value of human subjectivity here is: 'Things ought to make sense: and yield up interesting matter, even this! Look, I can make aesthetic sense of this, this initially blank work of art!'

William Hazlitt, writing of Turner's later paintings, agreed that they were 'pictures of nothing and very like'.<sup>13</sup> Some innocent people may still take this view of for example his *Val d'Aosta*, in the National Gallery of Victoria (Plate III).<sup>14</sup> This is a work which may occasion both a physical and an emotional loss of balance. One can restore one's balance by glossing the painting with lines from Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, and with that poem's pantheistic construction of 'a sense sublime' in terms of some 'presence' 'whose dwelling is the light of setting suns'. Before the nothing there is arrest and, then, the imposition of aesthetic ideas. These may well fall short of the full Wordsworthian affirmation, but there will be, always, some such aesthetic ideas.<sup>15</sup>

Of course at the level of sensory input, a Turner or a Newman never was 'nothing'. But at the next level, of ideas, it is (as we should for a moment be), dumb. This is a case where 'dumb' is stressed, between 'unspeaking' and 'infans' on the one side, and the American sense of 'stupid' on the other. In this context I would like to borrow again from Lyotard:

Shock is *par excellence* the evidence of (something) happening, rather than nothing at all. *It is suspended privation.*<sup>16</sup>

Newman's minimalism needs to shock—we first need to be dumb or dumb-struck; then all the intensional aspects of the matter which we or Turner or Newman reckon appropriate, can be allowed to invest the enigma and flood its deliberate emptiness, flood its privation enactment.

Privation enacted is itself suspended or cancelled by the imposition of aesthetic ideas. Newman's painted surface enacts, Turner's *Dunstanborough Castle* imitates. The difference, if small, is important, and one might venture in the 1990s the view that enacted privation is stronger in effect than imitated privation, and is indeed the essence of the abstract-sublime. Newman would thus be stronger than, even, the Turner of *Dunstanborough Castle*. The difference between imitating and enacting privation is one which some Turners themselves elide, for instance the *Val d'Aosta* picture, which has been compared, if not to a Newman, yet to a Rothko.<sup>17</sup> It is the picture's gesture towards nothingness which we must acknowledge. Fully to do this we must allow ourselves to be bored, in a highbrow sort of sense. We must actually yearn for something to disturb this empty calm which issues in '... the heaviness which quickly attends the inactivity of the mind ... a situation so very disagreeable to man ...'.<sup>18</sup> We ought to allow a Newman surface to be disagreeable, not to the senses but to the mind to which it does not at once offer entertainment. We ought to go with the boredom before we take the aesthetic ideas with which the painter's essays and our own cultural awareness will invest the painted surface; and which its structure will welcome or (half?) suggest. These ideas will make the still surface move; or, if you must, the surface will move the mind to ideas. The boring faced is, after a time, transcended.<sup>19</sup>

The basic mechanism of the whole business at the level of ideas is as one finds in Kant's transcendental epistemology of the sublime. My only addition—demanded I think by works by Newman, Still and Rothko—is the boredom-savoured in the presence of the so-minimal. This is, perhaps, the condition of a re-emergence from the darkness of the inarticulate into the daylight of intensionality. Burke's 'obscurity' and 'darkness' can be both literal and metaphorical.

Newman might be thought to be rewriting Kant from a Jewish, religious, point of view when he makes this statement in one of his essays: 'In the synagogue ceremony *nothing happens that is objective*. In it there is *only the subjective experience* in which one feels exalted' (my italics).<sup>20</sup>

'Subjective experience' in a gallery full of Newmans will suddenly

'exalt' as the observer 'finds' himself in the Newman 'zip', upright on a prairie of the imagination. The zip is a concrete metaphor of that subjectivity which brings the sublime with it. Newman's quite astounding *Stations of the Cross* must be felt as empty and negative before the 'Lema Sabachthani' gives sense to that emptiness: 'Why? whyfor Lord have you abandoned me?'. The emptiness is not here filled by the words. The emptiness of the paintings is only articulated by the painter's gloss on it.<sup>21</sup> As visual extremes the paintings are, if sublime, yet only faint, faint enactments of the ultimate question 'Lema?'. This is a question to which art has no answer.

There is a poem of Emily Dickinson's which comes to the paradox of the sublime:

There is a solitude of space,  
A solitude of sea,  
A solitude of death, but these  
Society shall be,  
Compared with that profounder site.  
That polar privacy  
A soul admitted to itself  
Finite Infinity.<sup>22</sup>

Is the Finite Infinity in its privacy *exalted*, as Newman is in his synagogue? Or have we here the quintessence of *ennui*? It depends on what Dickinson is offering us after death.<sup>23</sup> One's reading of these eight obscurely bleak lines must be pitched between the Transcendentalists' optimism of the 'Infinite' and a vision of a possible hell. A hell of a soul 'turned in upon itself' in a pauperly finitude for an eternity. This might most horribly realise Marvell's possibility of 'Desarts of vast Eternity'. If Dickinson here offers us the hope of an Emersonian Heaven, the sparseness of her poem enacts a certain chilliness, a certain claustrophobia. Even, though the suggestion may seem to beg our present question, Dickinson's poem enacts a sense of boredom. The tenor of Dickinson's poem may be positive, but the vehicle of it smacks of the 'Desart'. And the desert is a sublime of privation, a sublime of the boredom of boundlessness, of boundless emptiness, of human presence exhausted by mere space.

For Kant the sublunar Transcendental Ego has no absolute view of itself; it cashes out as the—mere—' "I think" which accompanies all my representations'.<sup>24</sup> It, even 'turned in upon itself', never sees itself. There is a modern Thomistico-Kantian, Fr. Arthur Little, S.J.<sup>25</sup> for whom the aesthetic moment, creative or appreciative, is a

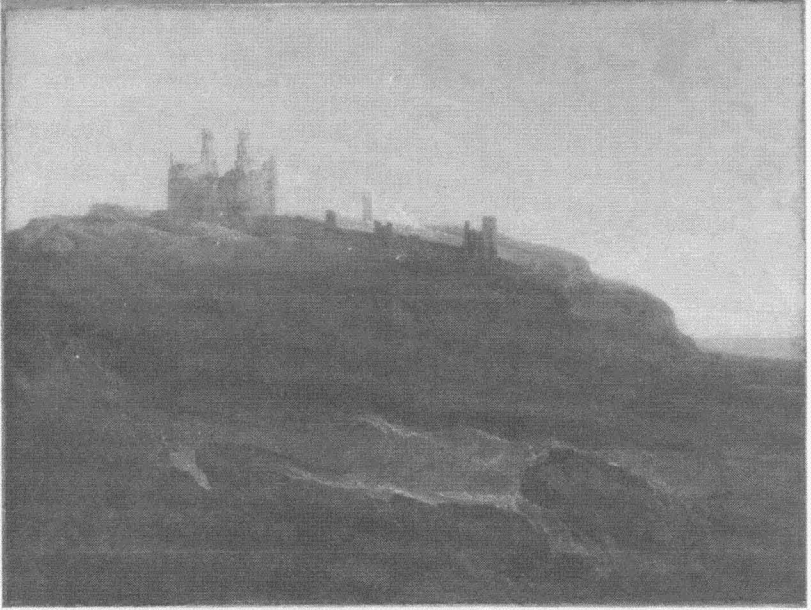


Plate I.  
J. M. W. Turner,  
*Dunstanborough Castle,  
North-east Coast of  
Northumberland, Sunrise  
after a Squally Night*, 1798

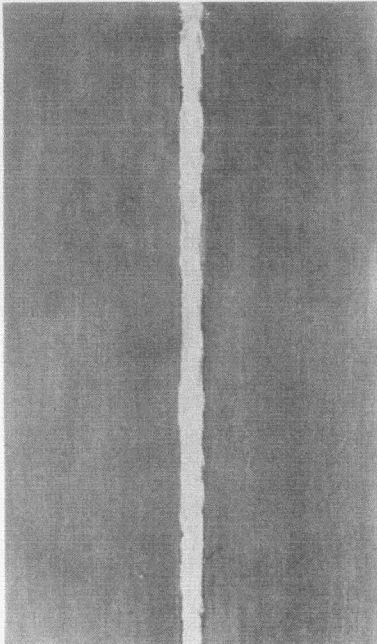


Plate II.  
Barnett Newman,  
*Onement I*, 1948





Plate III. J. M. W. Turner, *Mountain Scene, Val d'Aosta*, c.1840.

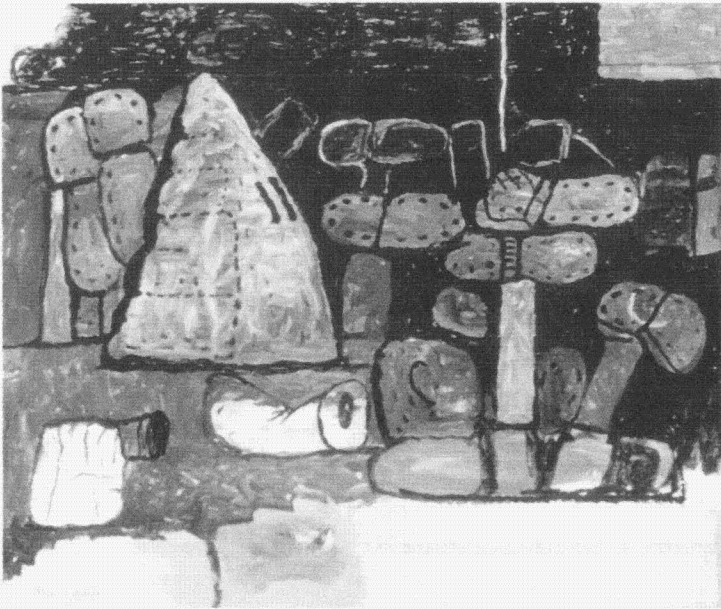


Plate IV. Philip Guston, *Night*, 1972

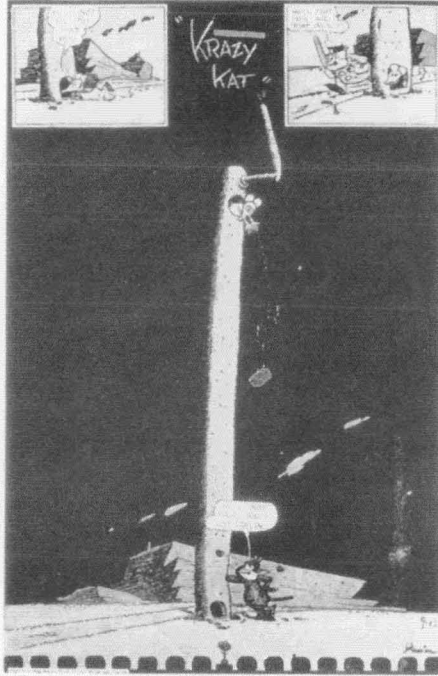


Plate V. George Herriman, *Krazy Kat*, 9-12

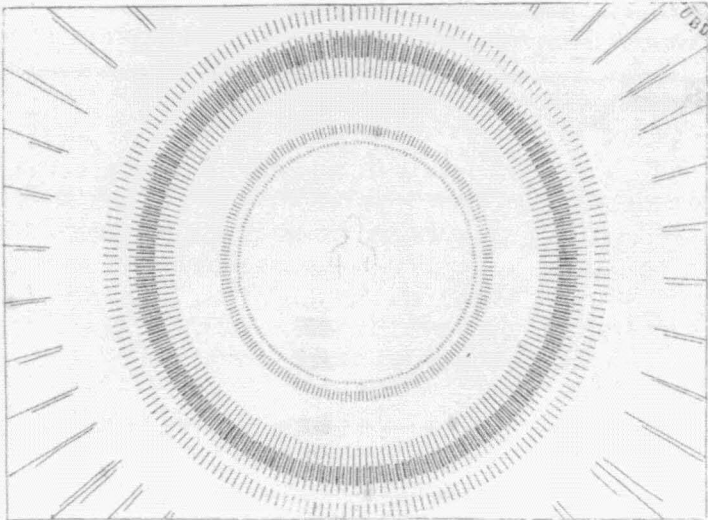


Plate VI. John Flaxman, 'The Beatific Vision'

flicker of a virtual intuition of the artist's or the appreciator's own soul. Little is only tangential to the concerns of this paper; he is mentioned because he would perhaps exceed Burke's expectations of 'a soul turned in upon itself', and he satisfyingly completes a range of possible positions on this 'turned-in-ness'. He offers the soul a virtual intuition of itself: the shields of Pallas, the aesthetic looking glasses, are numerous,—the 'true' object of the aesthetic experience is, always, the soul. This is at once like and unlike Kant. Kant offers only 'Critical' possibilities, reminders of the dignity of both ourselves and of our Ideas of Reason. And crucially he offers us aesthetic ideas as the nearest thing there is to escape from the critical 'cramp' of ideas (aesthetic) which go beyond the ordinary but do not go far enough to the *extraordinary*.<sup>26</sup> Kant and Little are both, at bottom, aesthetic monists, who find the 'soul' at the bottom of the aesthetic.

This paper, and its rough and ready phenomenology, were largely inspired by the Guston painting *Night*, in the National Gallery of Victoria (Plate IV),<sup>27</sup> with its vestigial KKK figure, cigarette butt, and numerous old boots and boot-lasts. What one wants to say about *Night* would go in spades for Guston's *East Tenth* in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. I am always struck, looking at the National Gallery of Victoria picture, with two simultaneous and seemingly contradictory impressions. One is: 'It's boring—not to mention sordid with its old boots and rubbish'. The other is: 'It's splendid: and it has even a—quite paradoxical—sense of sublimity'. It is a special case; it is a case of paradox within the sublime, when the sublime itself is already paradoxical.

For Guston, in one way, and for me, in another, it all goes back to Krazy Kat. George Herriman's comic strip<sup>28</sup> Krazy Kat (Plate V)<sup>29</sup> is, as is well known, a Guston source,<sup>30</sup> if not directly of iconography, at least of a certain tone in the late works. And it is a precedent for a certain 'blockiness' in the rendering of solid forms in late Guston. Guston's period of intense drawings, as if he were setting out to rediscover drawing itself, around 1967–1975, issued in notations as bare as Herriman's, and with his flair, but with Guston's heavier air of authority.

It happens that as a child I had access to a lot of Krazy Kat, and memories of enchantment and boredom come back with a rush when I see Krazy Kat now. My next few remarks project upon late Guston certain experiences which I had with Krazy Kat. It would be absurd to ascribe similar experiences to Guston; but a way of reading Guston

may come out of my experiences.

Children read comics either for the story or to re-enact the rôles of certain characters; and children re-read, beyond the point of re-reading tolerable to most adults. A fine account of children's reading can be found in a story in Kenneth Grahame's *Dream Days*<sup>31</sup> called 'Its walls were as of Jasper'. A child is looking right into the background, presumably of an Arundel print of a late medieval or early Renaissance picture:

There was plenty to do in this pleasant land. The annoying thing about it was, one could never penetrate beyond a certain point. I might wander up that road as often as I liked, I was bound to be brought up at the gateway, the funny galleried, top-heavy gateway, of the little walled town. Inside, doubtless, there were high jinks going on; but the password was denied to me. I could get on board a boat and row up as far as the curly ship, but around the headland I might not go. On the other side, of a surety, the shipping lay thick. The merchants walked on the quay, and the sailors sang as they swung out the corded bales. But as for me, I must stay down in the meadow, and imagine it all as best I could.

We all read pictures in this way as children; we were at once proprietors and prisoners of the landscape and the narrative offered us by the picture. Frustrated by what is not there we either imagine the absent or dig further in, read and reread the old stuff. But repetition stales. Even so, one read on, looked further in and in. Details were milked for all the entertainment they had to offer. We became precious little Roger Frys, and we looked, well beyond the economy of seeing.<sup>32</sup> Boredom drove us to it; to intense concentration on a matter whose ostensive interest had faded and was flickering out. If one was going to grow up an artist, then Krazy Kat look-alikes might emerge in one's works: and perhaps they do in late Guston. One suggests a process more or less like this: Krazy Kat is looked at, and looked at, by Guston until the narrative is totally exhausted, and all that remains are the bare visual notations. These notations themselves, 'recollected in tranquillity' are subsequently reworked and reconstructed by Guston in the paintings of his last period; and they bring with them the aura of the exhaustion of the original avowed content of the Herriman comic strip. The 'recollection' of notations carries with it 'recollection' of *ennui*. This story one can impute, as model rather than as historical description, to Guston. How does Krazy Kat bear, for the mere observer, on late Guston?

I did not grow up to be an artist: but as a young man looking at Blake's Dante illustration, *Styx, The Signal Tower and Phlegyas*,<sup>33</sup>

I looked with an aching sense of the Krazy Kat of my childhood. Herriman's odd buildings and mesas fused with Blake's images. Part of what I recollected was a small, existential *angst* of childhood: the ache of boredom where Krazy Kat could yield no more, but one stuck with him, though a bit sulky, and one could not turn to some other diversion. The little *angst* fed the sublime one which Blake no doubt intended to evoke among his adult public. I at least had further-emptied pictured landscapes as empty as Blake's *Styx*, before I knew about Blake.

Boredom in childhood does not lead to a sense of the sublime. The young soul turned in upon itself by *ennui* has no religious experience, no sublime moment that I can recall. It usually gets up to some mischief. But the childish boredom at the empty, when the empty is friendly images and narratives exhausted, can attach itself to the empty-sublimes of adulthood. Perhaps the adult sublimes are partly rooted in the childish ones. One does not know how this speculation could be confirmed or disconfirmed.

The vertigos of *ennui* may feed into the vertigos of the proper sublime. Certainly it feels like it when memories of Krazy Kat, both of the positive genial narrative and of the exhausted story and iconography, issuing in boredom, are laid over one's perception of late Guston. What an old fan of Krazy Kat could do for Blake, he feels impelled, by late Guston, to do for late Guston.

When Guston abandoned his 'purist' middle style, a style more or less within the contrived-emptiness formula of Abstract Expressionism, and produced his late works, he was greeted by Hilton Kramer's article, 'A Mandarin Pretending to be a Stumblebum'.<sup>34</sup> Guston's line on his change of style was clear: 'I got sick and tired of that purity! wanted to tell stories.' This avowal is not as straightforward as it looks. Guston's 'Stumblebum' pictures are not comic-book multi-frame narratives but discrete images. Krazy Kat came only sometimes as a one-framer, then it was indeed a full page spread like a Guston and often truncated as narrative. Guston's late works are fairly opaque as stories; so was Krazy Kat, but not, ever, as opaque as Guston. The return to narrative in Guston is not a simple matter at all; the stories need to be guessed at, like those in Victorian problem pictures. But, more importantly, the stories in late Guston never take you quickly past the enigmatic and proto-boring images. The narrative stalls before your eyes, leaving the enigmatic image of trivia or rubbish and one feels, at first: A little gazing will exhaust this! Unlike Krazy Kat, which leads with entertainment, then slowly expires, late Guston

almost at first look demands the vacuum pump: Get to the boredom, so the next stage can roll on. And it does, surprisingly, roll on.

It is not narrative, primarily, that one looks at late-Guston for; rather, one looks for the paradoxical sense of the sublime in the trivial, one traces a trajectory from the ridiculous to the sublime, indeed. The old boots should be totally banal, but they come out as exultation. The boredom of the old boots,<sup>35</sup> and the notations of them which are so flatly there, confront one: one is bored; one bounces back. Guston avoids beauty in the Renaissance sense, and his narratives are intentionally 'dumb'. It is precisely the Stumblebum effect which invites one to be bored; one gets bored so that one can be excited, afterwards. The Kantian machine is cranked up like one of Guston's horrible, bulbous automobiles. But, like them, it runs very well.

It may possibly be a double edged affair: Guston may be trading off two elements, the first something like boredom in the sense of boredom which this paper has stumblingly tried to particularise; and the second, a re-use of conventional sublime tropes. The ghost of sublime-painters' space floats in Guston's backgrounds—the seemingly neutral bits, which have the surface fascination of high painting. Rubbish or worse tends to be the topic and the focus, and it floats in and dominates a—'sublime'?—void. Does the mind cling to this rubbish like a drowning man to a straw; cling even to its boringness? My suggestion is that the mind does just this; then it discovers sublimity, in the reassertion of its own transcendental subjectivity. And it does this, perhaps, by noting in a preconscious way 'these trivia have been recorded with such care that we must care about the records of them'. And cashing this second 'care' by marshalling appropriate aesthetic ideas is the only appropriate reaction to a late Guston.

The cover of the Whitechapel catalogue *Philip Guston Paintings, 1969–1980*<sup>36</sup> shows an old boot, mounted on a snug-fit two-tiered podium or stand. The boot is surrounded by beautiful paint posing as nothingness. When you open the back cover of the catalogue out, and display both leaves, you find that the boot is a pair to another image: it is sphinx to a roughly-rendered pyramid. Two well-known sublime images are to be seen more or less in Kokonino Kounty! And there is nothing else. If you must look (and you must; Guston's *facture* hypnotises you) all you'll ever get is what you see. Boring? Sublime? I suggest it is both: first one, then the other. Or, if you like, they happen in a virtual simultaneity.

The cover to the Australian catalogue *Philip Guston: the Late*

*Works*<sup>37</sup> shows a steaming tea kettle—life size or gigantic we cannot be sure—on the ‘horizon’ of an unmodulated red foreground. The background is an obscure ‘sky’ which could be borrowed from any number of the old painters of the sublime, European or American, but which bears the essential signature of Guston in its paint strokes.

The Stumblebum grips us, even in our boredom with the trivia, he grips us with the power of an Ancient Mariner. We go on looking at Guston, though his narratives are less luxuriant than Crazy Kat’s and much much less rich than Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*. We go on looking, I suggest, because Guston has successfully ‘turned’ boredom. The mind seizes, in a kind of desperation, on what it is offered. Boredom is like the dynamic or mathematical sublime: it provokes us to be our better and rational selves, and to rise above negation and an array of trivial objects, both. As Kant puts it, ‘We discover within us a power of resistance ...’. Having been provoked into a sense of our rational dignity, on to the ennui of old boots and emptiness we allow ourselves to impose the humanistic readings of Guston which are appropriate: ‘He painted after the Holocaust’.<sup>38</sup> After that crisis for humanity, old boots take on a symbolic charge beyond the Dickensian, beyond nineteenth-century or current socialist pathos, and they read as signs of ultimate human failure, of human depravity beyond conception.

Boredom may remind us that we were born for its total opposite, the Beatific Vision; and perhaps it is this idea which, unspoken, haunts the Emily Dickinson poem.

By paradox (and in the sublime we expect paradox), a most apt sublunary image of the Beatific Vision is Flaxman’s rather boring, but remarkably powerful, *Beatific Vision* (Plate VI),<sup>39</sup> from illustrations to *La Divina Commedia* (*Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII).<sup>40</sup> This work offers very little to the sense, but—after the moment of *ennui*—‘grand ideas’ spring to the mind. The suggestion of this paper is that *ennui* is the way in to the—consequent—sense of grandeur. First we react to Flaxman’s minimalism, ‘What a dull image’; then we see that it is as full as, here below, we may have. It is symbolic because mimesis is impossible in this case, and in an Enlightenment time, a mimesis of Heaven is well known to be impossible. But Heaven remains the ultimate pole from boredom, and even unbelievers may see the point of St Augustine’s ‘Fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te’.<sup>41</sup>

Of the absolute all, we can, here below, realise virtually nothing;

of God, Kant would have it that our knowledge is purely symbolic.<sup>42</sup> Boredom may be a way in to this idea. Boredom is not knowing because there is too little here to know, and the knowing of what is not here is mediated only by symbols themselves liable to wear threadbare.

Boredom is the very index of our contingency and 'thrownness': the flight from boredom is a flight to something—as Kant would put it—'of quite another kind'.<sup>43</sup> It is a flight to something more than the human soul itself, even: it is to that which is forever new, and forever the same and inexhaustible; it is a flight to the ultimate Logos.

... Pour ne pas oublier la chose capitale,  
Nous avons vu partout, et sans l'avoir cherché,  
Du haut jusques en bas de l'échelle fatale,  
Le spectacle ennuyeux de l'immortal péché ...  
Baudelaire<sup>44</sup>

## Notes

- 1 This paper was first written before reading Patricia Meyer Spacks's *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*, Chicago and London, 1995, and it takes boredom as a well-known experience, not requiring any very special definition. Spacks's work suggests that my casual ostensive definition of boredom may be rash. My interest is in those forms of non-narrative art which may incite feelings of boredom, rather than provide an escape from it.
- 2 The three epigraphs are from J. T. Boulton's Introduction to his edition of Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757, London, 1958; Notre Dame, 1968. The Burke, (not from the text of the *Enquiry*), p.lvi; du Bos p.lv; Baillie, p.lii.
- 3 Baillie's 'A higher idea of her own powers' may easily be mis-read in the context of the sublime as 'an idea of her own higher powers'. The paper simply elides this issue: but it is an important one.
- 4 Jean-François Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the *avant garde*', trans. Lisa Littermann, New York, *Art Forum* 22 (18 April 1984): 36-43.
- 5 *Philebus*, 51b -51d.
6. In *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill, Notes and Commentary, Mollie McNickle, New York, 1990, pp.170-730.
- 7 Lyotard, p.40a.
- 8 Lyotard, p.37c.
- 9 Joseph Mallord William Turner 1775-1851 British. *Dunstanborough Castle, North-east Coast of Northumberland, Sunrise after a Squally Night* 1798. Oil on canvas. 92.2 x 123.2 cm. Presented by the Duke of Westminster, 1888. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia.



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- 10 Barnett Newman *Onement I* 1940. Oil on canvas. 27 x 16 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. Gift of Annalee Newman. Reproduced by permission of the Museum of Modern Art.
- 11 The question of the relation between sensations and ideas concerned eighteenth-century philosophers. All that abstract-sublime painting offers *prima facie* is sensation: what we want from it, and what it wants from us, and what the artist intended, is ideas. Or, such is the common doctrine. See also Note 15 below.
- 12 Lyotardian shock, 40c. Although indebted to Lyotard for the word 'shock' I may not be using it in his sense.
- 13 William Hazlitt, 'Imitation and Pedantry', cited in Walter Thornbury, *The Life & Correspondence of J. M. W. Turner*, second rev. edn, London, 1877, Ward Lock Reprints, 1970, Ch XXXVI, 395–96. Hazlitt does not, of course, stop at 'nothing'. His remark about 'nothing' is in this context: 'We here allude particularly to Turner, the ablest landscape painter now living, whose pictures are, however, too much abstractions of aerial perspective, and representations not so properly of the objects of Nature as of the medium through which they are seen. They are the triumph of the knowledge of the artist, and of the power of the pencil over the barrenness of the subject. They are pictures of the elements of air, earth, and water. The artist delights to go back to the first chaos of the world, and to that state of things when the waters were separated from the dry land, and light from darkness, but as yet no living thing, nor tree bearing fruit, was seen upon the face of the earth. All is "without form and void". Someone said of his landscapes that they were "pictures of nothing and very like"'. Hazlitt's insights here are proto-modernist, and at the same time full of Burke.
- 14 Joseph Mallord William Turner 1775–1851. *A Mountain Scene, Val d'Aosta* c.1840. Oil on canvas. 91.5 x 122.0 cm. Acquired through the assistance of the Government of Victoria and other associations, 1973. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia.
- 15 See Patrick Hutchings, 'The old and the new sublims: do they signify? God?', *Sophia* 34, 1 (March-April 1995): 49–64.
- 16 Lyotard, p.40c.
- 17 Memory Holloway, 'Mark Rothko's Untitled (Red): Colour and the Experience of the Sublime', *Art Bulletin of Victoria* 23 (1982):13–15.
- 18 Du Bos, Boulton's edition of Burke's *Enquiry*, p.lv.
- 19 On the issue of our moving at once from facture to high ideas, the following is of great interest: 'Many have written about the sublime effect that accompanies the experience of the art work or of poetry—when a painting (or a brushstroke in a painting) or a poem (or the effect of two words, or sounds) evoke something so deep in the reader that from that moment onwards it remains with him or her, inexpressible but intensely significant. For myself, for a while, that experience was effected by a passage of yellow paint in a Jackson Pollock painting from 1943. That brushstroke, in its application fat and serious, cutting into but floating across a background of dark grey, spoke to me of sensuality and clarity, or surety and risk, of innocence and knowledge.' Christopher Chapman, 'Words', pref. to *Selected Poems by James Gleeson*, Sydney, 1993, p.vii.
- 20 'Recent American Synagogue Architecture', in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, p.181. See also Lawrence Alloway, 'The American Sublime' and 'Newman: The Stations of the Cross', in *Topics in American Art Since 1945*, New York, 1975, pp.31–51. The key monograph on Newman is Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*,

- New York, N.Y., 1978, 1994.
- 21 See Newman, pp.187–90.
  - 22 Poem number XXV of *The Single Hound*, in *Emily Dickinson: Selected Poems*, New York and Avenel, N.J. 1993, p.184.
  - 23 Dickinson does not directly indicate that the soul's self-encounter is posthumous. She might have had some mystical, 'now'-event in mind. My reading follows the overt structure of Dickinson's own verbal-icon: solitudes are listed: of space; sea; death: then there is a 'profounder site'. I site this 'site' posthumously because it comes after 'death' in the poem.
  - 24 'I think': see *The Critique of Pure Reason*, B.131 –B.136, pp.152 ff, trans. Kemp Smith, London, 1929.
  - 25 Arthur Little, S.J., *The Nature of Art, or, The Shield of Pallas*, London, 1946.
  - 26 See *Kant's Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, trans. Meredith, Oxford, 1928, pp.210, 176.
  - 27 Philip Guston 1913–1980 American. *Night* 1972. Oil on canvas. 168.7 x 200.0 cm. Felton Bequest, 1988. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia. Reproduced by permission of the David McKee Gallery, New York.
  - 28 See *The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics*, ed. Bill Blackbeard and Martin Williams, New York, seventh printing, 1988, Section II, pp.126 ff. See also the note on Crazy Kat's inventor George Herriman (1880–1944) in Richard Kostelanetz et al, *Dictionary of the Avant Gardes*, Chicago, 1993.
  - 29 George Herriman *Krazy Kat*, 9–12. Reprinted with special permission of King Features Syndicate, New York.
  - 30 See Dore Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, Berkeley, 1976, pp.13, 29–39, 80, 131, etc. See too, Joseph Ablow, 'New Beginnings: The last paintings of Philip Guston', in the catalogue *Philip Guston: the late works*, International Cultural Corporation of Australia, (undated), pp.24–25.
  - 31 Kenneth Grahame, *Dream Days*, London, 1929, p.91.
  - 32 'Biologically speaking, art is a blasphemy. We were given eyes to see things, not to look at them'. Roger Fry, 'The Artistic Vision', in *Vision and Design*, London, 1957, p.47.
  - 33 See the catalogue, *Blake's Dante: Selections from The Originals in the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia and The Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts*, NGV/Harvard University Printing Office, 1953, pages unnumbered. (*Styx* is from The Fogg Collection).
  - 34 Cited in Norbert Lynton, 'An Obverse Decorum', cited in the catalogue *Philip Guston: Paintings 1969–80*, London, 1982, p.13, n.16.
  - 35 Boots and bootsoles in Guston's work: this set of images goes back to his earliest 1930s style; see Dore Ashton, pp.46, 75, 80-81, 106, 161, 173, 178, 187.
  - 36 *Philip Guston: Paintings 1969–80*. See also 'Philip Guston Talking', a lecture edited by Renée McKee, in this catalogue.
  - 37 *Philip Guston: the late works* contains essays, 'Freedom, Modernity, Humanism: The Late Works of Philip Guston', by Edward Fry, 'New Beginning: The Last Paintings of Philip Guston', by Joseph Ablow, and 'Philip Guston Talking'.
  - 38 See Dore Ashton, pp.74, 76, 80, 88, 177.
  - 39 John Flaxman 'The Beatific Vision' from *Compositions by John Flaxman, Sculptor*, R. A. from *The Divine Poem of Dante Alighieri containing Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise with Quotations from the Italian And Translations from*

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- the Version of the Reverend H. Boyd to Each Plate.* London, 1807. REproduced by Permission of the State Library of Victoria.
- 40 See Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art*, Princeton, N.J., 1967, illustration 200.
- 41 St Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk i, Ch.I.
- 42 *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, Sect. 59, p.223.
- 43 Op.cit., p.111.
- 44 Charles Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal*, CXXVI, Le Voyage, 'la Morte', VI. Francis Scarfe, trans., *Baudelaire, The Complete Verse*, Vol. I, London, 1986, p.244.