

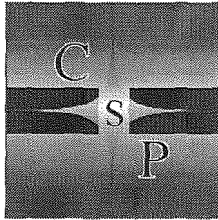
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Sublimer Aspects:  
Interfaces between Literature, Aesthetics,  
and Theology

Edited by

Natasha Duquette



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“The mountains, darkened by twilight, assumed a sublimer aspect, while the tops of some of the highest Alps were yet illumined by the sun’s rays and formed a striking contrast to the shadowy obscurity of the world below.”

—Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest* (1791)

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## INTRODUCTION

In *Some Great Nineteenth Century Preachers* (1901), Rev. J.R. Gillies surprisingly claims:

The greatest preachers of the age never enter the pulpit; they preach to us with their pens, and thus indefinitely multiply their audience and perpetuate their influence.<sup>1</sup>

For Gillies, a Presbyterian minister, such influence extends beyond the literary and aesthetic to the theological and ethical spheres. Gillies highlights the ability of poetry specifically to increase readers' empathy, as it encourages respect for and active listening to marginalized others. While referring to his own social outreach, Gillies reflects, "I have often thought of Wordsworth's leech-gatherer as I have sat by some of God's poor here in Hampstead."<sup>2</sup> How did Romantic aesthetics come to so strongly influence not only the theology but also the practice of Christianity by the late nineteenth century? *Sublimar Aspects* seeks to answer this question by examining interfaces between literature, aesthetics and theology through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In doing so, it considers the theological impact of canonical writers—such as Daniel Defoe, Alexander Pope, Voltaire, and Immanuel Kant—as well as writers whose work is now experiencing a revival, namely women writers—including Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck, Anne Brontë, Frances Ridley Havergal, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Adelaide Procter. The volume concludes with essays on the possibility for hope within the Christian Romanticism of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, and George MacDonald, whose texts continue to cultivate a sense of the transcendent in new generations.

Several publications attest to the recent interest in intersections between aesthetics, literature and theology, but none cover the interdisciplinary breadth of *Sublimar Aspects*. Some texts focus on theology and literature alone, others on theological aesthetics, but none provide a sustained examination of all three disciplines as they interweave through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Robert Barth's collection *The Fountain Light: Studies in Romanticism and Religion* (2002) gathers essays by literary scholars on the religious imagery deployed within



Romantic literature, but restricts itself to a focus on William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, considering only one woman writer—Felicia Hemans—in relation to Wordsworth. Similarly, Gesa Thiessen's *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (2005) includes hymns by Nikolaus Zinzendorf and Charles Wesley, and excerpts from the prose of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Immanuel Kant, but does not include any eighteenth- or nineteenth-century women writers. The text that comes closest to the aims of *Sublimar Aspects* is *Biblical Religion and the Novel, 1700-2000* (2006), edited by Mark Knight and Thomas Woodman. Like *Biblical Religion*, *Sublimar Aspects* follows a historical chronological order, but its temporal scope is narrower, and its interdisciplinary breadth wider, as it examines dialogue between theological essays, satiric verse, devotional prose, rhetorical sermons, philosophical treatises, lyrical poetry, and narrative fiction.

The volume consists of twelve chapters from scholars working in the disciplines of Literature, Cultural History, Theology, and Education. These chapters are divided into five sections, beginning with a section on providence, satire, and grace. In "Calvin and Hobbes: Providence and Politics in *Robinson Crusoe*" Ben Faber examines the tension between a Calvinistic understanding of Providence and a Hobbesian construction of materialism in Daniel Defoe's narrative. Faber argues that Hobbesian economic discourse ultimately destabilizes Calvinist theology in the novel. In "Satire, and Providence, and Pope" Katherine Quinsey examines Alexander Pope's engagement with the concept of God's transcendent and immanent Providence. She argues that Pope's satirical treatment of Calvinism was motivated by his pre-Reformation view that each individual may serve as a Christlike embodiment of God's Providence on earth. The next chapter, "Fate, Faith, and Freewill: Voltaire's *Candide* and Pascal's *Pensées*" by Melora Vandersluis, presents a similar structure of critique followed by solution. Vandersluis first outlines Voltaire's satire of optimistic Leibnizian philosophy and then presents Blaise Pascal's theological answer: acknowledgment of our sublime *and* fallible state and total reliance on God's grace.

Blaise Pascal was influenced by the Port Royalist community, whose Cistercian convent his sister would join, and whose forced dissolution Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck would later document and lament. The second section of *Sublimar Aspects* is devoted to the intersections between literature, aesthetics and theology generated by the topic of the sublime, and includes a chapter on Schimmelpenninck. This section begins with a chapter that examines definitions of sublimity in philosophical discourse, focusing primarily on Immanuel Kant. In "Kant's 'Safe Place': Security

and the Sacred in the Concept of Sublime Experience” Richard Lane argues that in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790) there is a realm that overflows any enlightenment definition of experience—the sublime—which facilitates a realm of sacred aesthetics. My chapter “Anna Barbauld and Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck on the Sublimity of Scripture” considers both Barbauld and Schimmelpenninck’s prose as a collaborative response to Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757, revised 1759).

The third section of the book focuses on women’s hymnody, with chapters on Anne Brontë and Frances Ridley Havergal. Susan R. Bauman’s “‘How Shall I Appear?: The Dialogue of Faith and Doubt in Anne Brontë’s Hymns” provides rigorous readings of Anne’s religious verse. This chapter wrestles with the resolution of dualism as it explores the dynamic tension between faith and doubt in the hymns “To Cowper” and “Confidence,” among others. The next chapter, “‘Take My Lips’: The Pleasures of Hymnody for Victorian Single Women” by Sandra Hagan, argues that a fresh evaluation of devotional verse as a mode of spiritual and corporeal self-realization will bring new insight to debates regarding women, aesthetics, and religion. Krista Lysack’s “*Kept for the Master’s Use: Frances Ridley Havergal and the Uses of Devotional Print*” considers the motivations behind Havergal’s prose exegesis of her popular “Consecration Hymn.” Lysack’s analysis of economic discourse in *Kept for the Master’s Use* suggests that it revises consecration as a form of plenitude.

In the fourth section of the book, chapters by Roxanne Harde and Cheri Larsen Hoeckley explore how theology informs social consciousness within Victorian writing. In “‘A Better Sermon’: The Child Evangelist in Victorian Women’s Writing for Children” Harde examines literary constructions of child evangelists at work reforming the world of the impoverished. In reference to short stories by Maria Edgeworth, Mary Martha Sherwood, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Harde argues that these women represent children’s acts of benevolence and generosity as preaching “a better sermon” than ministers in churches. In “Victorian Poetics, Catholicism and Philanthropy in Adelaide Procter’s *Chaplet of Verses*” Larsen Hoeckley focuses on the situation of impoverished urban women in nineteenth-century London, specifically. Procter’s collection of poetry was published as a fundraising tool for the Providence Row Women’s Night Shelter. In a fascinating move, Hoeckley reads Procter’s representation of the Virgin Mary—wandering homeless through Bethlehem—as inspired by Father Frederick Faber’s Marian theology.

The final section of the volume provides an overview of intersections

between theology and literature through to the end of the nineteenth century, with an emphasis on the generation of hope within Christian Romanticism. The three individuals whom Franceen Neufeld and Monika Hilder define as Christian Romantics are Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, and George MacDonald. Rev. J.R. Gillies includes Thomas Carlyle in *Some Great Nineteenth-Century Preachers*, praising “Carlyle’s hospitable heart, his breadth of sympathy, his profound intuition into the spiritual unity that underlies the most divergent forces.”<sup>3</sup> Franceen Neufeld’s chapter “‘An Internecine Duel With . . . Darkness’: The Nature and Context of the Gothic Response” argues that, in contrast to David Hume’s skepticism, Coleridge and Carlyle combine a Gothic awareness of darkness with Romantic transcendence and Christian revelation. In the final chapter of *Sublimar Aspects* entitled “George MacDonald’s Education into Mythic Wonder: A Recovery of the Transcendent,” Monika Hilder illustrates how MacDonald’s fiction still facilitates a regeneration of hope, imagination and awe in readers today. Hilder argues that MacDonald’s novels *At the Back of the North Wind*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, and *The Princess and Curdie* are suffused with a spiritual significance that has the potential to revitalize modern literary education.

The chapters in *Sublimar Aspects: Interfaces between Literature, Aesthetics, and Theology* together consider literary and philosophical representations of providence and grace, sublimity and beauty, devotion and consecration, social reform and regenerative hope. Gesa Thiessen suggests that there is a need today for scholars to reclaim a “wholesome systematic-poetic way of doing theology, an aesthetic theology and a theological aesthetic.”<sup>4</sup> *Sublimar Aspects* seeks to address this need through the realm of literature, providing diverse perspectives on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts. With their interdisciplinary approach, these perspectives will appeal to literary scholars, historians, philosophers, theologians, and even creative artists – to anyone intrigued by how a renewed sense of aesthetic wonder could draw us all closer to God.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gillies, *Some Great Nineteenth-Century Preachers*, 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>4</sup> Gesa Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, 7.