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“Our Eyes Adjust to the Dark”:¹ The Cosmic Sublime in Tracy K. Smith’s *Life on Mars*

ABSTRACT

The cosmic sublime, as the most spectacular manifestation of the natural sublime, offers rich stimuli for the literary imagination, as well as for various interactions between science, culture and art. In her book of poetry *Life on Mars* (2011), Tracy K. Smith uses tropes of cosmic perspective, scientific gaze and interplanetary travel to problematize the relationship between human finitude and the boundless unknown of the universe. Written after the death of her father, who was one of the engineers of the Hubble telescope, the volume links personal elegy and the work of mourning with philosophical questions about the relationship between the self and scientifically framed visions of the cosmos. The primary intention of my study is to examine the strategies and implications of the poet’s revisionary engagement with the aesthetics, rhetoric, popular mythology and mysticism of the spatial infinite. Smith employs the cosmic sublime not only as a spatial mode of perception but also as a metaphor of the emotional response to death. Her adaptation of the category expands the frame of reference for the purposes of an existential inquiry into the nature of humanity and transcendence. The celebration of imaginative freedom and modern science’s command of nature is further linked to constant apprehension about the human abuse of power and to anxieties triggered by the sublime mythology of transcendence, informed by a desire for dominating the other to the point of possession.

Keywords: Tracy K. Smith, American poetry, the cosmic sublime, the postmodern sublime, elegy.

¹ The quotation comes from Tracy K. Smith’s poem “My God, It’s Full of Stars” (*Life* 9).

INTRODUCTION

The cosmic sublime is the most pervasive manifestation of the natural sublime, offering rich stimuli for the literary imagination, as well as for various interactions between science, culture and art. Analyzing the relations between the cosmic sublime and American geography, Daniel Sage observes that “[c]osmology offers thought an intensely transcendental experience” (1). “Space,” the critic continues,

has always enabled new opportunities to look back on Earth, to look back at ourselves, as much as out and beyond us. The disorientation, infinitude and timelessness of the cosmic matter at once release us from socio-spatial points, mappings, hierarchies, human productivities and relations and forces us to appraise them in new ways. (1)

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In his study, Sage evokes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who refer to cosmic space briefly in *A Thousand Plateaus*, seeing it as a sphere marked by interwoven processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. According to the philosophers,

[s]pace is replete with emergent lines of flight, where coherent subjects and objects become imperceptible from each other in emergent, indeterminate movements: these flows of thought, matter and energy are excessive to our attempts to render them visible, whether the initial singularity, moments before the Big Bang, when space and time (and all life) did not yet exist, to the celestial transcendence of an omnipotent and omnipresent God of Judeo-Christian cosmologies. But Space is also occupied by “molar” reterritorializing practices that organize it by drawing lines between fixed points. (Deleuze and Guattari 480)

This continuous movement between deterritorialization and reterritorialization is reflected in Deleuze and Guattari’s models of smooth and striated space which can be applied to outer space, as well. The former model is best exemplified by the desert or the sea, with movements of people, water, sand and matter remaining unmapped and free; whereas the latter corresponds to the desert town or oasis, where movements are more constrained and fixed. Space can thus be classified broadly as “a threshold of deterritorialization, of smoothing” which subsequently undergoes the processes of reterritorialization (Sage 5).

It is precisely this double and “Janus-faced” (Parks 158–59) nature of the cosmic sublime—along with the tension between smooth and striated spaces as philosophical and existential categories—that Tracy K. Smith explores in her Pulitzer winning book of poems *Life on Mars* (2011).

Preceded by *The Bodies of Question* (2003) and *Duende* (2007), Smith's third book of poetry was written in response to the death of her father, one of the engineers of the Hubble Space Telescope. The volume links personal elegy and the work of mourning with philosophical questions concerning the relationship between the self and scientifically framed visions of the cosmos. As in her previous poetic work, Smith touches here upon existential and metaphysical questions as she probes the mind's confrontations with the experience of loss, emptiness, alienation and mortality. This time, however, her perspective oscillates between the intimate, private, at times even confessional mode, and the social one, broadening the spectrum of her philosophical explorations.

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The primary intention of my study is to examine the strategies and implications of the poet's revisionary engagement with the aesthetics, rhetoric, popular mythology and mysticism of the spatial infinite. The focus is on the functions and uses of the cosmic sublime in Smith's volume, including the spatial tropes employed to represent it. As I argue below, the poet summons the stock repertoire of sublime cosmology—including the cosmic perspective, telescoping, the scientific gaze and interplanetary travel—so as to problematize the relationship between human finitude and the boundless unknown of the universe. In *Life on Mars*, the cosmic sublime is not only a spatial mode of perception but also a metaphor for the emotional response to death. Another dimension subjected to inquiry is the socio-ethical one, as the poet reverses the extraterrestrial direction of her gaze to reflect back on the human implications of traditional and contemporary discourses of the cosmic sublime. The celebration of imaginative freedom and modern science's command of nature entailed in the experience of the sublime is linked to the continuous apprehension about human abuse of power and anxieties triggered by the sublime mythologies of transcendence. Those mythologies, as revealed in Smith's texts, are informed not only by a desire to understand the unknown but also by a need to dominate the other to the point of possession. Thus, on the one hand, interstellar travel and the cosmic gaze become Smith's tropes of desire for unfixing the horizons of human possibility and pushing towards new metaphysical, existential and epistemological frontiers. On the other hand, this desire, often fueled by scientific, technological and military developments, cannot be separated from ideologies of power, hegemonic control and our propensity for paternalism, aggression and violence.

Interestingly, in her considerations, Smith references pop cultural representations of the cosmos, including David Bowie's albums *Space Oddity* (1969), *Hunky Dory* (1971), and *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972), as well as Stanley Kubrick's

film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), based on Arthur C. Clarke's script. I claim that those intertexts, woven into a web of scientific, science-fictional and philosophical discourses, serve the poet to problematize the limitations of the anthropocentric perspective which informs our thinking about the universe. At the same time, they reveal the unboundedness of the human imagination, which, in striving for transcendence, tries to articulate different possibilities and desirable futures for humanity. By absorbing iconic pop cultural images and reinterpretations of outer space into the texture of her work, the poet also addresses the role of mediation in contemporary discourses of the cosmic sublime.

What follows is a close reading of Smith's poems through the lens of contemporary approaches to the cosmic sublime, including Deleuze and Guattari's notions of striated space, and postmodern reconceptualizations of the sublime by Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard, as well as Jean-Luc Nancy's, James Elkins's and Michel Deguy's respective revisions of the Kantian negative sublime. I also evoke David E. Nye's influential theory of the technological sublime to address the problem of mediated perceptions of the cosmos.

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THE POSTMODERN SUBLIME: BASIC PHILOSOPHICAL AND AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS

Drawing on diverse aspects of philosophy, theology, aesthetics and literary criticism, the sublime becomes a useful interdisciplinary tool for probing artistic confrontations with human and non-human realities. Defined first by Pseudo-Longinus as a rhetorical mode designed to move an audience, it has since been used to interrogate diverse issues, including transcendental conditions of thought, metaphysical uncertainties, indeterminacy and contingency of experience, the relation between the human and the inhuman, the loss of ego, and the representational insufficiency of art. In Thomas Weiskel's apt words,

[s]ublime is one of those terms like inspiration, vision, apocalypse, imagination, the daemonic—and, of course, transcendence—whose continual sublimation into metaphor makes thought possible by enabling us to grasp experience in terms sanctioned by the past—the essential critical gesture, already sophisticated in antiquity. (4)

The question arises, however, as to how this capacious aesthetic category functions under current cultural conditions and how it has evolved to respond to the representational, as well as existential concerns of today.

A term “beyond definition” and theoretization,² as Philip Shaw contends in his monograph *The Sublime* (2006), it has played a critical role in contemporary philosophical, literary and artistic discourses, challenging theoreticians and stimulating debates in diverse areas across the humanities (1–13). Stephen K. Land argues that “the sublime is an elusive and fluid concept which cannot be confined to either the word or the mind or the world but which is somehow realized in the meeting of all three” (38). It should not be seen so much as a “conceptual entity capable of succinct definition,” Vincent Arthur De Luca observes, “but rather . . . a field, like the force fields of physics—a region of indeterminate boundaries” (4). However, the field has been “carved up into distinct emphases upon ‘rhetorical,’ ‘the natural,’ ‘religious’ sublime and others” (Weiskel 5), which continue to influence contemporary reconceptualizations. The foundation of the sublime aesthetics for contemporary philosophers—including Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Rancière and Jacques Derrida—is Immanuel Kant’s theory of the sublime, formulated in his *Critique of Judgment*. The German philosopher employs the concept of the sublime to explore the transcendental aspect of aesthetic experience, as well as to problematize the relations between sensations, feelings, imagination and thought. Importantly, for Kant the sublime is not an attribute of nature: “[s]ublimity, therefore does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind, insofar as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us” (Kant 504). The Kantian sublime conceptualizes an experience of the transcendental beyond, revealing the ways in which imagination and emotions respond to great, extraordinary, incomprehensible and inconceivable phenomena. The discord at the core of the self produced by the sublime judgment results from the rupture between the imagination and reason upon their confrontation with the unrepresentable—the “sublime object”—that shatters human expectations and norms. Linked to aesthetic and moral value, the Kantian sublime has remained of particular interest to ethically inclined philosophy and art, and, consequently, it has been adapted, revised or deconstructed in contemporary philosophical discourses.

The persistence of the concept derives not so much from its universality, as the term has a long history of reinterpretations, but rather, as Judy Lochhead claims, from its absorption by postmodern thought and the semiotic economy of our times (63). Favoring the ineffable, the apocalyptic and the unrepresentable, postmodern thinkers see the sublime as a bridge

² Jane Forsey similarly problematizes the concept’s resistance to theory in an essay provocatively titled “Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?” (381–89).

between the universal and the new, reflecting also modern man's need to redefine her/himself outside existing conventions and traditions. Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson (in, respectively, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* and *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*) have revived both the rhetoric and the aesthetic of the sublime to address the increasingly confusing phenomenological and experiential reality of the postmodern era. Linking it to a more general crisis of representation (Lyotard, "Question" 77), as well as a "waning of affect" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 11), both recognize the potential of the term to articulate the growing sense of disparity between form and content. In his essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?", Lyotard defined this crisis as follows:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. ("Question" 81)

Jameson goes so far as to postulate that the sublime is the very condition of postmodernity, its chief philosophical and cognitive mood, linking it to the growing incomprehensibility of the social, technological and economic experience. For the philosopher, the Burkean and Kantian natural Sublime has been replaced by the "hysterical" or "camp" sublime, a "new depthlessness" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 6), born out of the uncontrollable forces of late capitalism's omnipresent technologies. As a global and pervasive "network of power and control," this system is "even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp" (35, 38). The effusive sources of infinitude, channeled into the "Capital," a new global Deity, have produced "a euphoric-anxious" self (Jameson, "Postmodernism" 76–79), at once ecstatic and drained by the exaggerated, hallucinatory gleaming surfaces of ever-present and ever-new commodity signs. Jameson further links the postmodern sublime to "the decentering of the formerly centered subject or psyche," which results in the collapse of the "autonomous bourgeois ego" (*Postmodernism* 15), no longer capable of comprehending its own surroundings. Anxiety—"a hermeneutic emotion, expressing an underlying nightmare state of the world," which was the dominant affective mode in the modernist period, has given way to more "free-floating" and "impersonal" feelings or "intensities" (16). This postmodern self of the sublime, Rob Wilson contends,

is expanded into an infinitude of ungrounded images, as a simulacrous self emerges into a “schizoid text” of fragmented flows: one commodity sign among billion; the self absorbed not into a natural godhead but into a gigantic simulacrous order that one can only hail, mock, demystify, distance, abjure, worship, “map,” as the *telos* of Advanced-Late-Global-Capital. (“The American Sublime” 524)

In addition to its convenient critical adaptability and inclusivity, the concept of the sublime also satiated the period’s repressed longing for lost absolutes. According to Lyotard,

The universe is not demonstrable; neither is humanity, the end of history, the moment, the species, the good, the just, etc.—or, according to Kant, absolutes in general—because to represent is to make relative, to place in context within conditions of representation. Therefore one cannot represent the absolute, but one can demonstrate that the absolute exists—through “negative representation,” which Kant called the “abstract.” (“Presenting” 68)

In his *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Lyotard further foregrounds this aspect of the phenomenon, defining it as an absence produced by the imagination to indicate the presence of the absolute. “In excluding itself from its own limits of presentation,” Lyotard proposes, “the imagination suggests the presence of what it cannot present. It unbinds itself from its finality and thus annihilates itself according to this finality” (Lyotard, *Lessons* 152). This violence to the norms of the imagination is a crucial element of sublime “ex-stasis” as the intensity disrupts all expectations and conditions of human experience. In the philosopher’s words, “[i]t is a sort of spasm in which what has been done does not govern what is yet to be done” (Lyotard, “On What Is Art” 345),

a conflict brought to the point of rupture where the proliferating network of imaginary possibilities becomes shredded and the act or comprehension appears as it truly is in its princely principle: not the rule of knowledge but the law of transcendence and the unknowable, the event itself and the act that is incomparable to any regularity [and regulation]. (347)

In this rupture Lyotard sees the political potential of the sublime, as it encourages heterogeneity and “dissensus” (Lyotard, *Differend* 44).

There are, however, more skeptical approaches to the aesthetics of the sublime which include Derrida’s deflation of its metaphysical ambitions in his essay *Truth in Painting* and Paul De Man’s deconstructive reading of Kant’s Third Critique in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. Both philosophers

foreground the inherent undecidability of language which undermines the metaphysical conditions of the sublime, along with its rhetoric of transcendence. In his study of the Romantic sublime, Thomas Weiskel argues that we have lost our capacity for this variety of wonder and are no longer astonished by nature's grandeur: "[t]he infinite spaces are no longer astonishing; still less do they terrify. They pique our curiosity, but we have lost the obsession, so fundamental to the Romantic sublime, with natural infinitude" (6). Clearly critical of the contemporary abuse of its rhetoric, art historian James Elkins goes even further, finding the sublime an altogether irrelevant, ineffable and confounding category. What is more, the critic sees "the postmodern sublimines" (note the plural form) as "positing a sense of presence and a non-verbal immediacy that short-circuits the principal interest of theorizing on art in the last thirty years" (76):

The concept has also been criticized because it leads scholars (like myself!) to focus on images of things that are incomprehensibly vast, or unimaginably small, or frighteningly blank, dark, blurred, smeared, pixilated, or otherwise illegible. The sublime, so it is said, takes people away from the real world of politics and society, of meaning and narrative, of culture and value. Poor anemic sublime. Poor elitist concept, born in the leisured classes of eighteenth-century Europe, lingering on into the twenty-first century as an academic hothouse plant. (79)

"One should see the quest for the sublime," Elkins adds, citing Richard Rorty, "as one of the prettier unforced blue flowers of bourgeois culture" (88). Clearly critical of the contemporary abuse of the sublime rhetoric, Elkins betrays a strong desire to abandon the concept altogether, seeing it as weak, elitist and irrelevant to the spiritually lacking and differentiated contemporaneity. Similarly appraising the current relevance of the category in his essay "The Sublime Offering" (1988), Jean-Luc Nancy reaches into the term's past to speak of a certain "fashion" for the sublime, as well as its residual presence in Western philosophical and aesthetic thought:

[T]he sublime forms a fashion that has persisted uninterruptedly into our own time from the beginning of modernity, a fashion at once continuous and discontinuous, monotonous and spasmodic. The "sublime" has not always taken this name, but it has always been present. It has always been a fashion because it has always concerned a break with or from aesthetics. (25)

Further in his essay, the French philosopher evokes the eighteenth-century aestheticians' concerns with the limited nature of the self in confrontation with extreme experiences and the incommensurability of the sensible with the metaphysical. Namely, he argues, "[i]t does not consist by itself

in a delimitation, even if negative, for the latter would still be, precisely, a delimitation, and the unlimited would end up having its proper form—say, the form of the infinite” (36). Focusing on the notion of the infinite and its representations, Nancy translates the Kantian concept of the sublime into the movement of figuration: hence the sublime occurs when “the unlimited gets carried away with delimiting” (36). According to the scholar, “[t]he sublime is: *that* there is an image, hence a limit, along whose edge unlimitation makes itself felt” (38).

Naturally, this brief overview of the current conditions, selected reconceptualizations and uses of the sublime does not exhaust its rich resonance for contemporary theory, philosophy, literature and art. However, the philosophical debates evoked above attest to the persistence of sublime aesthetics in postmodern thought, preparing the ground for the main thrust of this inquiry: the poetic representations of the cosmic sublime in Tracy K. Smith’s *Life on Mars*. Thus, in the next section I shall contextualize this particular variety of the sublime as it relates to the problem of representation.

THE COSMIC SUBLIME IN PHILOSOPHY AND POPULAR CULTURE

The cosmic sublime is an integral part of the Western sublime discourse. Mingjun Lu argues the following:

As an aesthetic category, the cosmic sublime provides a vantage point from which to view how the human mind confronts and conceptualizes grandeur of an infinite dimension. The cosmic sublime bears on at once man’s sense of his position in relation to a universe whose grandeur tends to overwhelm the “little fire” he kindles for himself and the imaginative flights to grasp and comprehend that grandeur. Experience of the sublime could be evoked by a variety of different objects, but that triggered by cosmic infinity has the power to exercise “the speculative intelligence of human thought,” prompting it to meditate on metaphysical truths that “often pass beyond the limits that confine us.” (695)

The vast impenetrability and depthlessness of cosmic space have captured the attention of philosophers, scientists and artists, inspiring diverse narratives of our civilization and of the universe, and proving a fertile ground for critical inquiry. The early thinkers of the sublime—such as Pseudo-Longinus, Joseph Addison, John Dennis, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant—included cosmic infinitude, with its overpowering darkness, solitude, silence and emptiness, among their concepts of

the natural sublime, finding in it a perfect exemplification of the unrepresentable. As noted by Weiskel, the first development of the natural sublime in the seventeenth century “was the identification of the Deity’s traditional attributes—infinity, immensity, coexistence—with the vastness of space newly discovered by an emergent astronomy” (14). Equipped with the discoveries of the Apollo lunar program, NASA’s “most spiritually charged mission” (Sage 49),³ the explorations of Mars and the impactful imaging of the Hubble telescope, contemporary philosophers likewise delve into the philosophical and cultural resonance of the cosmic sublime. Apart from Deleuze and Guattari, with their aforementioned conceptualization of the cosmos as a tension between territory and the forces of deterritorialization, a philosopher who has engaged the topic more directly is Lyotard. In his essays on Jacques Monory’s paintings for the 1981 exhibition *Skies, Nebulae and Galaxies, 1978–1981*, Lyotard discusses the cosmic vistas shown in the artist’s work as a form of nihilistic sublime, a negative presentation reflective of “a discrepancy between presence and infinity, between existence and meaning” (“Assassination” 192). According to the French philosopher, Monory’s paintings, which show—for example—images of stars and galactic events mediated by the telescopic gaze, turn the Ideal into the real, negation into reality, whereby the absolute incarnated in the photographic image “expose[s] its [own] nullity” (Lyotard, “Assassination” 192). An aspect particularly relevant for the present discussion is Lyotard’s problematizing of the role played by new technologies in artistic mediations of the cosmic sublime. Namely, the philosopher contends that “[t]he cosmological infinite seems to be effaced behind the technological infinite” (“Assassination” 195). The symbolic unboundedness and immensity have been re-located from intuition to technological powers and mass media representations, thus changing the cultural poetics of the sublime. Photography, whose abstracting powers exceed the faculties of the mind, is figured here as a murderous “assassin” that threatens the world of human meaning and reveals “what life is in the absence of any experience that can be shared” (Lyotard, “Assassination” 196). This abstracting inhuman vision of the absolute, a vision “without a subject” and without time, nevertheless has an affirmative dimension. As argued by the French philosopher, upon a realization that the conditions of the absolute experience are technological and ultimately constructed, we are pulled by two contradictory feelings: “the melancholy of not being

³ As noted by Sage, “Apollo 8 was also significant because of the images it relayed back of the Earth rising over the lunar surface, as the capsule passed within seventy-one miles of the lunar surface: the most well-known of which was the image *Earthrise*. This image has regularly been praised for its sublime beauty, its uniqueness, and its capacity to denote the fragility of the Earth and humanity” (49).

able to experience the absolute accompanied by the joy of being able to conceive of it. This state of sublimity . . . is not ecstasy, but it is at least half-grace” (Lyotard “Assassination” 209).

The sense of awe and the attendant existential concerns inspired by the technologically mediated cosmic absolute have found their reflection in contemporary literature and art. Both high and popular genres were employed by artists to represent the radical inhumanity of outer space and to investigate ethical questions provoked by the extraterrestrial perspective. Numerous novels and science fiction films have explored the cosmic through experimental uses of perspective, defamiliarization, an apocalyptic tone, technically complex special effects, exploitation of scale and distance through dynamic camera movement, neo-Baroque distortions of visual planes, religious architecture, imagery and discourse (Tashiro 38). J. G. Ballard’s haunting vision of the imminent end of the cosmos, conceptualized in his “Voices of Time” as an unwound clock, or Stanisław Lem’s *Solaris*, where interplanetary travel leads to a confrontation with the radically non-human Other, capture some of the postmodern concerns related to the cosmological infinite. Although Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, based on Arthur C. Clarke’s futurist short stories, is the most provocative, ground-breaking and influential cinematic example, one should also include George Lucas’s *Star Wars* series, Fred Wilcox’s *Forbidden Planet* or Gene Roddenberry’s and Robert Wise’s *Star Trek* series, all of which tried to merge the cosmic and the cinematic. The airless void of intergalactic space was here translated into a rich cultural imaginary, also inspiring contemporary writers. It was, however, Kubrick’s radically alienating “technical virtuosity” and his creative use of “nonverbal experience” (Benson 8)⁴ that established the new representational paradigm for the cosmic space which proved stimulating for many artists, including Tracy K. Smith.

Space exploration has also inspired musicians, including David Bowie, who employed the motif of space travel and the extraterrestrial gaze in his now iconic albums *Space Oddity* (1969), *Hunky Dory* (1971) and *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972).⁵ In the latter

⁴ Alexander Walker has observed that “[b]y suppressing the directness the spoken word, by breaking with narrative logic, Kubrick has insured that watching his film requires an act of continuous inference on the part of viewers to fill in the field of attention by making their own imaginative connections. Though as rigorously conceived as any of Kubrick’s major films, the whole work leaves the densest impression of images which are free to imply much more than eye and mind take in” (267).

⁵ Bowie himself admitted the significance of Kubrick’s *2001* for his generation and for his song “Space Oddity”: “For me and several of my friends, the seventies were the start of the twenty-first century. It was Kubrick’s doing on the whole. With the release

concept album, Bowie took on the persona of an alien omnisexual rock star, the eponymous Ziggy Stardust, who comes to Earth to bring hope to the earthlings, whose world is about to end. “For here am I sitting on a tin can / far above the world / Planet Earth is blue / and there’s nothing I can do,” ponders another interplanetary traveler, the fictional astronaut Major Tom, who features in Bowie’s “Space Oddity” (Bowie, *Space*). From the vantage point of the artist’s entire career, Major Tom, drifting into the sublime cosmic space, beyond human control, can be read as the artist’s vision of his own alienated position as a stylistic “drifter,” transgressing genres, conventions and forms. Indeed, Bowie is himself a sublime figure, a metaphor of discontinuity, of infinite metamorphosis and theatrical excess, a myth of the self pushed to its limit, escaping categorizations and boundaries.

The philosophical and scientific conceptualizations of the cosmic sublime alongside their technological and pop cultural representations are what underlies Smith’s poems in *Life on Mars*. The poet taps into the intermedial and intertextual richness of popular and scientifically mediated cosmic tropes through direct and indirect citations of iconic images and texts, the use of shifting perspectives and abstract spatial imagery inspired by the cinematic and techno-scientific gaze. Her evocations of Bowie’s lyrics and Kubrick’s signature cinematography reveal an attempt at re-reading and recontextualizing the cosmic sublime to invest it with personal significance, and to translate the metaphysics of loss into the metaphysics of melancholic return. The speaker of her poems, as demonstrated below, searches the sublime imagery for a spatial and temporal fissure, a passage outside human time and memory, which will help her deal with the unrepresentable event of her father’s death. The motif of cosmic travel opens her poems up to a melancholic affective dimension—the persistence of an engulfing personal pain that cannot be sublimated. At the same time, the lyrical voice invites us to reflect on the ethics of the human quest for the higher order and the mediated aspects of the postmodern sublime.

“THERE WILL BE NO EDGES, BUT CURVES”: TRACY K. SMITH’S REVISION OF THE COSMIC SUBLIME

The tropes of the Kantian sublime resonate already in Smith’s opening piece “Sci-Fi,” in which the poet introduces the tension between a limit and the lack thereof:

of two magnificent films, *2001* and *A Clockwork Orange*, within a short period, he pulled together all the unarticulated loose ends of the past five years into a desire of unstoppable momentum” (Bowie and Rock 12).

There will be no edges, but curves.
Clean lines pointing only forward.

History, with its hard spine & dog-eared
Corners, will be replaced with nuance,

Just like the dinosaurs gave way
To mounds and mounds of ice.

Women will still be women, but
The distinction will be empty.

... Weightless, unhinged,

Eons from even our own moon, we'll drift
In the haze of space, which will be, once

And for all, scrutable and safe. (7)

The utopian “science-fiction” vision of the future reality, clearly echoing technological representations of the cosmos, is replete with a Deleuzian interplay between smoothness and striation, embracing and destabilizing categories of space, time and body. In the transcendent outer space, the poet imagines a future free of limits, with the edges released from the regime of sharp angles, suggestive of instrumental “striations”—mappings, divisions and possessions—and softened into elusive “curves,” leaving “clean lines pointing only forward” (Smith, *Life* 7). Those “lines of flight,” to borrow from Deleuze and Guattari again, pointing in the direction of futurity, work to disentangle the self from the linear progress of time and the human narratives evoked in the second stanza through the spatial images of the “hard spine” and “dog-eared corners” of history. Those “textured” and textual material realities will also be transformed, cleansed and smoothed out, allowing the body to escape the past, and become liberated from gravity, mechanisms of control and social labels, “unhinged” to “drift” freely in the indefinable, a-textual “haze of space” (Smith, *Life* 7). This escape fantasy of the space which is thus de-schematized and detemporalized—“once / And for all, scrutable and safe” (7)—is as seductive as it is unstable, leaving the reader uneasy, given the paradoxical “spacelessness” and haziness of disembodied drifting. Furthermore, the drift carries a threat to the subject’s unity as the borders of his/her existence dissolve, and the mind becomes “unplugged” from the known perimeters of human existence. The faintly ironic tone of the final line also echoes Deleuze and Guattari’s skeptical

observation about the human dream of the ultimate deterritorialization and annihilation of the historical self in the silent vastness of Cosmos: "Never believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us" (500).

Thus conceived, the cosmic deterritorialization, and travelling outside any recognizable perimeters of time and space, prepares the ground for another thematic layer, namely the death of Smith's father. As the poet admitted in an interview, the book emerged in the shadow of her father's terminal illness and his subsequent demise:

I wrote a poem called "Sci-Fi" several years ago that offered a clean and glamorous vision of the distant future. . . . Then my father was diagnosed with a terminal illness. My sense of the future became very personal. *Life on Mars* became a way to move towards my father, to try to understand some part of the mystery of death. (Smith, "Space Poet" 477)

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Life on Mars can thus be read as an elegy, where death becomes the true unknown, the true dark matter with which Smith confronts us through her cosmic tropes. The stellar landscape and the technological gaze are employed as a tribute to her father, Floyd William Smith, one of the Hubble Telescope engineers. Designed in 1990, the Hubble Space Telescope, orbiting the Earth, brought a revolutionary view of the cosmos, allowing astronauts to observe it with unprecedented clarity and detail, shaping the popular images and representations of Space (Kessler 4). One of the most iconic images from the telescope, "Cone Nebula Close Up," adorns the cover of Smith's book, further linking its thematic concerns. Among other things, the cover problematizes the mediated perception of the cosmic sublime, which takes us outside the conditions of human experience.

In the poem "My God, It's Full of Stars," whose title is borrowed from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the poet refers directly to her father's technologically enhanced "star-gazing":

When my father worked on the Hubble Telescope, he said
They operated like surgeons: scrubbed and sheathed
In papery green, the room a clean cold, and bright white.

. My father spent whole seasons
Bowling before the oracle-eye, hungry for what it would find.
His face lit-up whenever anyone asked, and his arms would rise

As if he were weightless, perfectly at ease in the never-ending
Night of space.

...

The first few pictures came back blurred, and I felt ashamed
 For all the cheerful engineers, my father and his tribe. The second time,
 The optics jibed. We saw to the edge of all there is—

So brutal and alive it seemed to comprehend us back. (Smith, *Life* 12)

The evocation of her father's relentless, "surgical" efforts to penetrate and reterritorialize the smooth space of the universe, by pushing the boundaries of human vision and knowledge, serves Smith to connect the experience of the cosmic sublime with the experience of death. The Hubble Telescope becomes a vehicle for a desire to carry oneself to the position from which one can attain a totalizing, near-divine perspective of the universe. The sublime, as argued by Michel Deguy in his rereading of Pseudo-Longinus, always brings to view the question of our mortal condition. In his words, the sublime is "the concentration, the start of the startling that weighs in speech against death. . . . The sublime is the ephemeral immortality of the point gained, adverse speech snatched from death where the totality of becoming-and-passing-away concentrates itself" (11). Focusing on the relationship between cognition and affect, David E. Nye sees the sublime as a "broken figure of thought, which permitted both the imagination of an ineffable surplus of emotion and its recontainment" (282). Given its ephemerality, the sublime opens an unbridgeable gap between the experience and the senses, but its true nature can be grasped only through the failure to represent. In Deguy's apt words, "[the] sublime measures our failure," showing our distance from the sacred, "our incapacity to navigate through the straits of difference between immortal and mortal" (7).

Smith's recourse to the sublime tropes in her grappling with mortality seems to fulfill a similar role: the topoi try to capture her response to the absolute emotion grounded in her anxiety of a nothingness at once physical, metaphysical, and spiritual. Her father's ease in "the never-ending / Night of space" and the metonymic telescope image, which can take us to "the edge of all there is— / So brutal and alive it seemed to comprehend us back" (Smith, *Life* 12), become part of the elegiac movement away from the excesses of grief, through the recognition of loss, towards a possibility of consolation. This elegiac process of grieving and the search for solace that allows the self to "recontain" the surplus of feeling, to bring the excessive into view, informs all of the poet's subsequent inquiries into the nature and mysteries of Space.

Further in the poem "My God, It's Full of Stars," the poet repopulates her earlier "clean" and "smooth" sci-fi vision, as if reflecting back on her own "fearlessness" (Smith, "Space Poet" 477), as well as an overconfident belief in transcendence and the cosmic space's security, totality, weightlessness

and “smoothness.” The disquieting image of Kubrick’s protagonist, the astronaut Dave Bowman, “whisked into the center of space,” “across the wide-screen of unparceled time” (Smith, *Life* 11), takes on a double significance in Smith’s poem. It indicates a liberation from the constraints of gravity and human perceptions of time; simultaneously, however, it uncovers a dissolution of the self. Furthermore, the image of the “wide-screen” introduces a tension between the sublime moment and its aesthetic framing. The screen undermines the representational efficacy of the mind striving to grasp the scale of infinitude, threatening the sublime with stasis and fixation. In a Lyotardian sense, the sublime collapses, for the self’s leap outside time requires a mediating intervention, “a screen,” and as such it is always already at a second remove. The timeless emptiness and lack of “anchor” in her “sanitized,” bodiless futuristic metaphysics is replaced by a fractured, striated earthly landscape. The shift is enacted through a series of anguished questions concerning the body’s physical demise and dissolution (Smith, “Space Poet” 477). This earthbound fall expresses the speaker’s doubt about her father’s final journeying “toward the ecstatic light” (Smith, *Life* 27). “What happens when the body goes slack? / When what anchors us just drifts off toward . . .,” the speaker anxiously asks, adding: “You stepped out of the body. Unzipped it like a coat / And will it drag you back / as flesh, voice, scent?” (Smith, *Life* 33). Confronted with the absolute fact of death, symbolized by the silence, quietude, materiality and stillness of the dead body in the funeral parlor, the poet’s imagination begins to “replenish” the cosmic void, as if to clip its previous “lawlessness” and utopian weightlessness. Groping its way out of the dark matter of a terrifying absence, its absolute mystery, the speaker’s mind remains uneasy with its own abstract appropriations of the sublime, and produces a very physical and energetic image of the “humanized” space “choc-full of traffic”:

Perhaps the great error is believing
 we’re alone,
 That the others have come and gone—
 a momentary blip—
 When all along, space might be choc-full of traffic,
 Bursting at the seams with energy we neither feel
 Nor see, flush against us, living, dying, deciding,
 Setting solid feet down on planets everywhere,
 Bowing to the great stars that command, pitching stones
 At whatever are their moons. They live wondering
 If they are the only ones, knowing only the wish to know,
 And the great black distance they—we
 —flicker in. (Smith, *Life* 10)

The image of the alien beings, “setting solid feet down on planets everywhere / Bowing to the great stars that command, pitching stones / At whatever are their moons” again references the central scene from Kubrick’s *Odyssey*, in which the alien super-race steps down from their galaxy to intervene in the Earth’s affairs. The rectangular black monolith left behind by the God-like visitors proves a turning point in the history of our planet. As observed by Benson, this “totemic extraterrestrial artifact . . . channels the species toward survival, success—and, eventually, technologically mediated global domination” (2).

The cinematic contexts of Smith’s poetic glimpses beyond the earthly limits are rich in significance. In an interview for *Nature*, Smith acknowledges her interest in popular sci-fi movies of the 1960s and 70s:

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In Stanley Kubrick’s majestic film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, his most suspenseful moments are the slowest and quietest, and his associative leaps have been instructive. I have been influenced by the visual sensibilities of classic 1970s sci-fi films, such as *The Andromeda Strain* and *The Omega Man*.” (Smith, “Space Poet” 477)

Kubrick’s odyssey “beyond the infinite” and his stellar gaze inform *Life on Mars*, as they represent the consciousness and the body released into spaces of imagination. The film’s narrative, as noted by Michelson, “becomes a voyage of discovery, a progress toward disembodiment, [and] explores . . . the structural potentialities of haptic disorientation as agent of cognition” (56). However, the epistemological confusion and displacement of the body do not exhaust the movie’s philosophical concerns, inspiring Smith’s own grappling with existential mysteries. The adopted cosmic view allows Kubrick to reconsider the Western civilization’s values of progress and humanism, which, as suggested by the film’s plot, have their dark undercurrent, as they have always been coupled with violence, conquest and destruction. Interestingly for Smith, Kubrick also addresses the question of art’s role in the explorations of the sublime, using the black monolith trope as an ambiguous symbol of the sublime which connects the mythological past and the metaphysical future, while defying human comprehension and interpretation. Sensitive to those darker psychological tones of Kubrick’s interstellar dystopias, Smith’s verses resonate with a similar sense of fragility, isolation and uncertainty. As Robert Kolker observes, “Kubrick’s narratives are about the lack of cohesion, center, community, about people caught up in a process that has become so rigid that it can be neither escaped nor mitigated—a stability that destroys” (110). Evoking the mystical aura of Kubrick’s central scenes, Smith at once displaces her anguish onto the medial “other” and self-reflexively signals the intertext’s mediating

aspect—the constructed nature of the cosmic sublime, whose absolute, as Lyotard observes, is nullified by any mediation. The references to Kubrick's classic, which fuse poetry with cinematic language, hint at humanity's endless efforts at representing the unknown, uncovering the paradoxical nature of sublime aesthetics. The conditional qualifiers "perhaps," "might" and "as if" in Smith's text further distance the poetic image from the "truth" of the sublime experience and foreground doubt at the core of the postmodern sublime.

In subsequent poems, the speaker tries to shorten the "great black distance" between the universe and the self by resorting to various discourses and codes. In the poem titled "The Universe: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack," the space becomes "a soundtrack," with "synthesized strings. Then something like cellophane / Breaking in as if snagged to a shoe. Crinkle and drag. White noise, / Black noise" (*Life* 24), until the "dark we've only ever imagined" becomes "audible, thrumming" and "Everything that disappears / Disappears as if returning somewhere" (24). In another poem, the Universe is a "house party," with "postcards / And panties, bottles with lipstick on the rim" and "radio waves from a generation ago / Drifting to the edge of what doesn't end" (Smith, *Life* 13). The speaker is clearly back in the loop of human perceptions, enmeshed in a powerful sensory influx which is thrown against the incomprehensible and infinite expansion of the cosmos. The final phrase, "we flicker in," however, carries an undertone of ambiguity—a fear of instability and of the potential disappearance of our visual trace in the vastness of the universe.

In the poem "Don't you Wonder, Sometimes," whose title is another borrowing from Bowie, Smith builds on that anguish as she asks:

And what would we do, you and I, if we could know for sure
That someone was there squinting through the dust.
Saying nothing is lost, that everything lives on waiting only
To be wanted back badly enough? Would you go then,
Even for a few nights, into that other life where you
And that first she loved, blind to the future once, and happy?
Would I put on my coat and return to the kitchen where my
Mother and father sit waiting, dinner keeping warm on
the stove? (*Life* 19)

In his study of the sublime as an offering, Jean-Luc Nancy repeats the Kantian claim that the sublime, as "the passage to the limit" (Nancy 52), can only be *presented*, never *represented* (28), as it will always "overflow" the image or form that tries to contain it. Similarly, Jacob Rogozinski, echoing Lyotard's notion of negative presentation, observes that the sublime ultimately reveals nothing (145). It is the striving towards the

limit, “a continuous effort” as “the continuous displacement of a limit” that lies at the heart of the sublime feeling (Nancy 53). In Nancy’s words, “[s]triving and exertion transport the limit into themselves: it becomes their structure” (53). The imagination at the limit, Nancy continues, finds itself in “extreme tension and distention (‘overflowing’ and ‘abyss’)” (46). Smith’s adoption of the Hubble Telescope’s perspective and the scientific lens reflects the subject’s position at the limit. The technological gaze keeps us at “the outer perimeter of everyday visibilities” (Parks 7), allowing us to “see both further and better than the human eye,” and thus “threaten[ing] to undermine the authority of the scientist-viewer” (Parks 150). Nevertheless, it becomes the poet’s way of confronting the unrepresentable limit—the event of her father’s death, more poignantly felt when the speaker is pulled back to the familiar spaces of her childhood, now haunted by her father’s absence. The form of questions without answers enhances the psychological gravity of the poet’s loss, while the echoes of Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in the tentative invitation to join the poet on her spatio-temporal travel (“Would you go then . . . / into that other life?”) imply a limited human trajectory and a dead end beyond that escapist version of her dream.

Science and its mythology of reason, clarity, efficiency and control, driven further by a hunger for answers, truth claims and precise delimitations, fails the poet as it once failed her father and his team when “the first pictures came blurred” (Smith, *Life* 12).⁶ Thus, the poet, in her quest for meaning, reaches for popular mythology and the science-fiction tropes of space travel. In “My God, It’s Full of Stars,” the poet again ponders the possibility of transcendence as she imagines an afterlife as a form of travelling and “seeing” across space and time:

Maybe the dead know, their eyes widening at last.
 Seeing the high beams of a million galaxies flick on
 At twilight. Hearing the engines flare, the horns
 Not letting up, the frenzy of being. I want it to be
 One notch below bedlam, like a radio without a dial.
 Wide open, so everything floods in at once.

⁶ Sage quotes the Hubble Heritage Team’s mythologizations of the telescope’s first photographs of the cosmos as the new American frontier: “Objects imaged by Hubble are often impossibly vast and amorphous—as unearthly as can be. Yet the compositions captured by the Hubble Heritage Team and others tend to evoke landscapes. The press release for the Eagle Nebula compared the gaseous columns to ‘towering buttes and spires in the deserts of the American southwest.’ Other Hubble images have been likened to roughhewn mounts of gas and dust. This allusion to landscape art connects the Hubble images to the romantic frontier art and artists of the 19th century who celebrate the majesty of the American West” (116).

And sealed tight, so nothing escapes. Not even time.
Which should curl in on itself and loop around like smoke.
So that I might be sitting now beside my father
As he raises a lit match to the bowl of his pipe
For the first time in the winter of 1959. (Smith, *Life* 12)

The transcendental trope of the cosmic, ever-widening gaze allows the poet to displace, for a moment, the painful experience of death, and reimagine afterlife as a black hole, an infinite void or abyss into which “everything floods in at once . . . so nothing escapes / Not even time.” The imagined obliteration of any definite temporality pulls the reader into an illegible non-atmosphere, a temporal chasm bypassing history and human measurements of life’s relentless flux. And yet, the sublime image of time “curling in on itself” reestablishes the earthly perspective through another specific childhood memory, of the winter of 1959, a moment mappable in the family time and space which reunites the speaker with her father. In the (a)temporal “loop” of images, the outer space, with its mythologies of timelessness and transcendence, becomes imaginatively entangled with the intimate habitat of the poet’s memory.

Probing the cultural imaginary for an idiom best suited to speaking about the absolute of death, Smith resorts also to the medium frequently linked to the metaphysical undercurrent of the sublime, namely music. In the poems cited above, the cosmic space is often imagined as silent, but in a few other pieces it has its own “soundtrack,” again referencing Smith’s cinematic inspirations.⁷ This soundtrack comprises noise “one notch below bedlam, like a radio without a dial” (12). Noise, argues Josh Epstein in his study *Sublime Noise*, as “a species of expression” resistant to mimetic claims and easy interpretation, becomes a symbol of otherness, non-identity and subversion—it “invades the autonomous sanctum of music, it comes to represent not just a (nebulous) category of sound, but a way of scapegoating sounds as unwanted” (11, 2). In Smith’s text, it functions as an interference or rupture in the sublime fiction about the absolute silence (or music) of the spheres, along with its divine communications. What is more, noise is also associated with technology, which opens up the poetic text further to the pressures and the destabilizing forces of mediation.

⁷ Notably, Kubrick’s *Odyssey* is famous for its eclectic soundtrack and its rich metaphoric potential. Kubrick employs both tonal and atonal music to capture the ineffable order of the cosmos, including Richard Strauss’s symphonic poem *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Johann Strauss’s iconic *Blue Danube Waltz*, György Ligeti’s atonal *Lux Aeterna*, *Requiem* and *Atmospheres*, and the “Adagio” from Aram Khachaturian’s *Gayane*. For an in-depth study of the soundtrack, see David W. Patterson’s essay “Music, Structure and Metaphor in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*” (2004).

Noise, thus, seems to be “roughing up” the totalizing and often mute texture of the cosmic sublime, working to contaminate the purity of its aesthetic scripts.

This penchant for the granular otherness and deconstructive aspects of sublime tropes is visible also in Smith’s decision to borrow the protean persona of Ziggy Stardust and the escapist narratives of David Bowie’s songs. Both the lyrics and the cosmic imagery employed by the British artist become her “lines of flight” from the circumscriptions of her own mind and the uneasy questions of mortality. Claiming discontinuity, difference and endless metamorphosis as his defining characteristics, Bowie himself embodies the postmodern sublime, marked by the “collapse of the ego.” The hybrid personas created by the artist resist totalizing dynamics and serve to deconstruct Smith’s own quest for a higher order, adding a dimension of otherness to the philosophical scripts of the cosmic unknown. “To reduce Bowie’s most unique quality to a single word,” Ian Chapman observes, “he is inherently *other*” (16, emphasis original). In Smith’s words, Bowie “leaves no tracks / Slips past, quick as a cat”; he is like a comet that “burns bright / Dragging a tail of white-hot matter” (Smith, *Life* 19–20).

The transgressive Stardust, whose chameleonic, postmodern nature is, as Chapman notes, “calculatedly assembled from an amalgam of references from popular culture and borrowings from art history, film, literature, and other sources” (14), is also shaped by diverse musical styles⁸ and shifting perspectives within individual songs. For instance, in “Moonage Daydream,” Ziggy Stardust appears directly, introducing himself as an “alligator” and alien “space invader,” “mama-papa coming for [mankind]”; in “Starman,” Bowie uses the vantage point of a child receiving messages from an alien messiah, the eponymous Starman, who “is waiting in the sky” and “would like to come and meet us,” while in “Five Years,” desperate earthlings on the brink of destruction start an apocalyptic countdown; in “Lady Stardust,” the perspective is that of a fan of Ziggy’s rock band besotted with his idol’s “animal grace” and hypnotized by his “songs of darkness and dismay” (Bowie, *Ziggy*). In the already mentioned “Space Oddity,” which does not belong to the Ziggy Stardust mythos but can be linked to it by the motif of the cosmic

⁸ Musically, the albums feature elements of jazz, folk, gospel, hard and glam rock, classical music, pop and disco, and anticipations of punk rock (Perone 27). Bowie’s eclectic musical taste was also described in Decca Record Company’s press release for the album *David Bowie*: “He loves to sit amidst a bank of column speakers listening to Stravinsky, usually ‘Ragtime for Eleven Instruments.’ He adores Vaughan Williams, Dvořák, Elgar and Holst. His extensive record collection includes lots of Glenn Miller, Stan Kenton and Gary McFarland” (qtd. in Johnson 58).

gaze, the focus shifts between the earthly view of “Ground Control” and that of Major Tom, an astronaut released into Space and endowed with a detached God-like perspective which enables a magisterial look upon the planet (Bowie, *Space*). The changing points of view, the flamboyant narratives confusing fantasy and reality, and the transgressive nature of Bowie’s songs question the ideal of music as the voice of the sublime and the ineffable which seamlessly integrates form and content. The rich, multi-layered and ragged tapestry of Bowie’s music and imagery pushes aesthetic conventions to their “overflow,” implying that there is no proper form that could contain the infinite. For Smith, inspired by Bowie’s genre-bending, the protagonist of Bowie’s album additionally embodies the complexity of a diffused “hysterical” identity struggling to “delimit” itself and find its “place on Earth.” In Simon Critchley’s words,

As fragile and inauthentic as our identities are, Bowie let us (and still lets us) believe that we can reinvent ourselves. In fact, we can reinvent ourselves because our identities are so fragile and inauthentic. Just as Bowie seemingly reinvented himself without limits, he allowed us to believe that our own capacity for changes was limitless. Of course, there are limits—profound limits, mortal limits—in reshaping who we are. (54)

A similar hope for art’s power to reshape and reinvent identities reverberates in Smith’s poems. “Bowie will never die,” the poet asserts in “Don’t You Wonder, Sometimes?,” being “Not God exactly—a Starman / Or cosmic ace hovering, swaying, aching to make us see” (*Life* 19). Those intertextual references allow Smith to shed the romantic longings for sublime epiphanies and script emptiness back into fullness, silence into sound, and absence into presence. Thus, Bowie’s deity refuses to congeal into a monolithic absolute; being born afresh with each newly created self, he teaches us how to see ourselves from outside and “reshape who we are.” As a fiction invented through absorption and recycling of pop cultural texts and codes, Ziggy Stardust implies the fictionality of transcendence—the sublime as the supreme fiction of the imagination. Just like Kubrick’s *Odyssey*, Bowie’s artistic creations help the poet see the cosmic sublime as one of the mythologies of the self, invented by myth-makers wishing to come to terms with humanity’s uncertain future.

The postmodern sublime, nebulous and ineffable from the proliferation of selves and signs, also uncovers its social dimension. Ziggy Stardust’s chameleonic transformations and disjunctive narratives expose darker psychological and social scenes: in “Five Years,” the opening song of *Ziggy Stardust*, Bowie draws an apocalyptic vision of the dying earth, with

violence on the streets, personal alienation and attendant disintegration of norms and social ties.⁹ Bowie oscillates between the threats of stabilized and destabilized selves, using the outer space to address the anxieties of the inner self, including the dread of passing time, mortality, alienation and material dissolution, and to reflect upon the social and cultural milieus which often fail to provide adequate responses to those anxieties.

Tapping into the ironic and ambiguous attitudes of her pop cultural intertexts, Smith likewise tries to venture beyond the romanticized versions of the sublime rhetoric, transgressing the intimate confessional mode of her diction¹⁰ and reclaiming the sublime as a mode of bearing witness to violence. In the second half of the volume, the poet pulls the discourse back from her elegiac longing of the private self and from metaphysical questions of transcendence to the social and political dimension, which reveals the sublime as informed by discourses of power and hegemony. “What if dark matter is like the space between people / When what holds them together isn’t exactly love?”, the poet asks in the eponymous piece “Life on Mars” (37). In their recent study *Cosmic Society*, sociologists Peter Dickens and James Ormond argue that our dream about transcendence of the Self in Space “operates as a childish narcissistic fantasy—‘A God Complex’—undertaken by a, usually Western, male, and rich, cosmic elite who aggrandize their sense of Self in dreams of being ‘intermediaries,’ or ‘demi-Gods,’ in a ‘New Chain of Being’” (qtd. in Sage 455). Rob Wilson similarly observes that the sublime “‘overbelief’ in power and grandeur enables the further production of power and grandeur” (*The American Sublime* 13). Smith evokes this God Complex and the human dream of dominance in a series of headline news dealing with abuses of power, such as child rape and incest, torture, racially motivated murders, where dominance translates into nightmarish violence. Smith’s examples include “a father in the news who kept his daughter / Locked in a cell for decades,” “[l]ike a god / Moving through a world where every face looked furtively into his” (Smith, *Life* 39), or the prisoners at Abu Ghraib “strung like beef / From the ceilings of their cells” by their guards who were just “blowing off steam” (40). The God-like ability to wield power divorces

⁹ Bowie himself has admitted that the alien characters of his early songs are metaphors for his own inner space: “They were metaphysically in place to suggest that I felt alienated, that I felt distanced from society and that I was really in search of some kind of connection” (qtd. in Pegg 23).

¹⁰ In an interview with Charles H. Ryan, the poet explains the shifts from the personal to the social in her work as follows: “Now that American poetry is very good at being deeply aware of and awake to the private, I think it is important to use these tools to locate and explore material that engages and implicates the self in ways that extend beyond the private. We are certainly living in a historical moment where it would be criminal to recoil too deeply into the private” (Smith, “Something” 861).

men from their humanity. The earth, “[n]icked and sliced into territory. / Hacked and hollowed,” “ticking with mines” and plundered by humans (41), uncovers the dark inscriptions and results of human presence and scientific development, linking human dreams of power and hegemony to the initial metaphysical questions about God. “Is God being or pure force?”, the speaker asks in the opening poem “The Weather in Space” (Smith, *Life* 3), but in the second part of the volume, the word “force” resonates ominously, implying violence, conquest, terror and oppression. Smith’s intermedial probings into the cultural imaginary of the American sublime seem to convey also her resistance to its re-theologizing. Evoking the popular dreams and anxieties related to space exploration and alien encounters, the poet implies that humans can become aliens to themselves, as the expansion of the self, yielding to sublime yearnings and egotistic ideologies, often happens at the cost of the other.

Given the above, the enigmatic poem “It & Co.,” which seems to take us back to the “limit” by pointing to the indefinable sublime—the “It,” “vast and unreadable,” the It “we have gone looking for everywhere” (Smith, *Life* 17)—resounds with a disquieting ambiguity. The opening line of this piece, “We are a part of It. Not guests / is It us, or what contains us?” (17), echoes the egotistic Sublime of the Romantics as much as it points to human complicity in the structures of oppression informing the discourse, imaginings and tropes of the cosmic sublime. Furthermore, the question could be interpreted as Smith’s concern with American mythologies of the sublime, which, as argued by Parks, fostered American paternalism and geopolitical power, serving as “an agent of Western cultural imperialism and neo-colonial control” (73).

Exploring diverse categories of the sublime in his seminal study *The Romantic Sublime* (1976), Thomas Weiskel contended that “humanist sublime is an oxymoron” (3). As if echoing this statement, Smith writes in “It & Co.”: “It is elegant / But coy. / It avoids the blunt ends / Of our fingers as we point” (*Life* 17). The sublime in Smith’s poems escapes attempts at tracing it to a definite, “elegant” conclusion, refusing to become a palpable, fully reterritorialized design of the self; and yet it is somewhat humanized by the very gesture of pointing, reflecting the logic of the sublime sentiment which “touches presentation on its limit” (Nancy 52). Smith employs the inherited tropes of the cosmic sublime, summoning up their aesthetic and philosophical implications, but her relation to the sublime rhetoric is profoundly uneasy, self-conscious and revisionist, mirroring the changed and widening cultural contexts of postmodernity. The eclectic and intermedial texture of her poems shows the cosmic sublime as primarily textual—a disintegrating amalgam of myths, mass-mediated fantasies, desires and aspirations grounded in multiplicitous imaging and idioms. The

seductive dreams of an originating plenitude, that void-cum-plenum, and deceptive pretensions to totality inscribed in the sublime topoi are revealed in her poems as haunted by loss, abuse of power, spiritual anguish, and human suffering. Resisting the absolute reign of the sublime ideology, including American nationalistic cosmography (Sage 8), Smith's engagement with its discourse, mediated tropes, effects and popular mythologies produces emotion "without complacency, without satisfaction" (Nancy 52) that reaches to the depths of the human darkness. This darkness will not be illuminated; rather, our eyes will have to adjust to it, and confront the ethical and moral questions informing the sublime discourse today.

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