

Mark Canuel, *Justice, Dissent, and the Sublime*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. Pp. 175. \$49.95. ISBN 9781421405872.

Justice, Dissent, and the Sublime, like certain strands of ecocriticism, explores how Romantic theorizations may remain relevant and generative for contemporary society as it engages urgent questions. Mark Canuel asks if Romantic conceptualizations of the sublime can advance an understanding of justice, broadly conceived. He postulates that in recent thought, not only by what he delineates as ‘beauty theorists’ (31) but within ‘both queer and cosmopolitan theory’ (66), justice is primarily associated with beauty and its attendant ‘emphasis on proportion, symmetry and mutuality’ (4) and on ‘balance, and resemblance’ (121). By contrast, Canuel proposes that the Romantic sublime, particularly as articulated by Immanuel Kant and instantiated in poems by Charlotte Smith and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, offers a compelling alternative model that reveals the connections between justice and ‘asymmetry, complaint, and disagreement’ (4).

Legal theorists have engaged the role of aesthetics for justice from a variety of perspectives. Ronald Dworkin, in *Law’s Empire*, aligned legal interpretation with literary form and concepts of integrity, a model that implicitly endorses an aesthetic rooted in beauty to grasp justice as an evolving revisionary process. Contrasting with Dworkin, Richard Sherwin, in ‘Sublime Jurisprudence: On the Ethical Education of the Legal Imagination in our Time’ (2008), draws on Vico’s understanding of the sublime as marking a limit of the empirical. Canuel’s approach, while consonant with Sherwin, focuses on the wider discursive functions of justice, although his analysis implicates the legal sphere. He does not seek to jettison an aesthetics of justice, but argues for rooting it in the sublime rather than the beautiful. Doing so, he contends, demonstrates that the ‘oscillating structure of the sublime yields a connection with an account of justice based upon argument, complaint, and repair, an account that combines general rights with allowance for particular rights and seeks to make room for human desire and passion alongside reason’ (7). Canuel weaves through his analysis a corollary consideration of the academy’s investment in preserving the viability of beauty as a generative aesthetic; he associates this tendency with eighteenth-century aesthetic theory typified by Joshua Reynolds and with the academy’s ‘symbiotic relationship with multinational corporate enterprise’ (34).

Each of the book’s five chapters advance a view of the sublime in relationship to the contemporary moment and draws upon corrective Romantic texts to illuminate potentialities of sublime justice obscured within critical and popular discourses. The first three chapters concern, respectively, theories of the beautiful in relationship to justice (Chapter 1: ‘Beautiful People’), the Kantian sublime as offering ‘a sense of community beyond communion’ (62; Chapter 2: ‘Justice and the Romantic Sublime’), and the dependence of both queer and cosmopolitan theory on the ‘logic of beauty’ which Coleridge’s Conversation poems ‘reject’ (92; Chapter 3: ‘The Reparative Impulse’). In Chapter 4, ‘Biopolitics and the Sublime,’ Canuel, arguing an indebtedness by rights theory to beauty, suggests that the ‘sublime leads toward a more conflictual mode of configuring the relations between persons; it provides an aesthetic vantage point that highlights complaint, dissent, and disagreement in the midst of a larger scheme of social cooperation’ (97). He turns to a reading of Charlotte Smith’s *Beachy Head* to ‘focus discussion of the sublime and biopolitics’ because ‘the poem consistently dislodges its claims about the rights of individuals from its more obvious celebrations of national territory and internal social harmony’ (98). Canuel finds the form of the poem consonant with the figure of the displaced hermit who rescues, and perishes attempting to rescue, “helpless strangers” (108). He contends that registering the poem’s sublimity makes visible a reconceptualization of rights into ‘a more thoroughly politicized right that might be extended transnationally into new places, and new situations, with protections fostering

newly included persons— right for those without rights’ (110). He concludes the chapter suggesting that the ‘example’ that Romanticism might set ‘for the present’ is to ‘militate against the logic of exemplification itself’ (120). This sublime ‘aesthetic vantage point on a contentious mode of belonging’ leads into the final chapter, ‘Aesthetics and Animal Theory’ which asks ‘How can new members be included in the scope of justice’ (122) and takes the ‘treatment of animals’ as an ‘exemplary instance of the problem of justice’ as it is extended— or fails to be—toward ‘marginal beings’ (122-3). In this chapter, more than the others, a range of Romantic writers are brought to bear, including Barbauld, Trimmer, Cowper, Coleridge, and Shelley. In many ways, this final chapter serves as an extended test case for confronting the conflictual nature of the sublime, in opposition to conceptions of beauty, on the basis of the theoretical groundwork laid by the prior chapters. This is a provocative and challenging book, seeking the sublime as both its subject and its mode.

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