

Review Essay

On the Matter of Prepositions

Fran Bartkowski
Rutgers University

Peter de Bolla's *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989; 324 pp.) wants to be many kinds of criticism and theory at once. Its sharpest focus is on the emergence of subjectivity as a category of being in the eighteenth century and the issue of how we, as late twentieth-century readers, ought to understand both that emergence and its delimitations. It is also a study of those strands of (social, political, economic) textuality that may and must be gathered together in order to comprehend what de Bolla, following Foucault, calls a discursive network or analytic. For the postmodern critics who have reclaimed and reinscribed the category of the sublime (Frances Ferguson, Neil Hertz, Slavoj Žižek and others), de Bolla argues that they are deploying a discursive network already rather fully constructed by the nineteenth century without taking into account the complexity of the discourse *on* and *of* the sublime of the preceding century.

For de Bolla the crucial first move is to undo the discursive knot of "morality and money, wealth and health, sexuality and society, pleasure and duty, the public and private" that forms the substratum of the eighteenth-century sublime and its implied subject (277). While he denies polemical aims, this book nevertheless reads to me as a quiet cautionary tale for readers who are interested in asking how that which goes by the name of theory in the late twentieth century in fact functions as a funhouse mirror of the ways we construct and monitor subjectivity.

The historical focus of this book is the period 1756-63 (the Seven Years War), although, toward the end of his book, de Bolla moves on to later parts of the century, and even into the Romantic period in order to illustrate shifting parameters in the construction of subjectivity. The specific frame of the war years is construed as a time when the discourses of aesthetics and economics were juxtaposed and coincided in such a way as to reshape dramatically new notions of selfhood, knowledge and perception. What de Bolla does is to follow very closely three key texts on the sublime: Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Alexander Gerard's *An Essay on Taste*, and Lord (Henry Home) Kames' *Elements of Criticism*. He offers his readers the following advice and proviso: that we pay attention to the "operation of these exemplary texts as theory and not as theories about the world" (61). The surprising move is from the works on the sublime to a number of texts on the national debt during the war years. What de Bolla discovers by his

juxtaposition of these two discourses is an acute, if not to say an obsessive, attention paid to the dangers of excess.

This is a book whose stake in textuality as a key to knowledge is very plain; it takes as one of its objects of knowledge the "text-fear" of the eighteenth century for which the best evidence may be found in the moralizing public discourse on novel reading. De Bolla reads notions of the self which underlay ideas of subjectivity not only in the discursive practices of philosophy and aesthetics, but also through paintings, diagrams, manuals of behavior and elocution, and arguments about the proper role of the Bank of England. In taking up the texts on national debt and the social and political body they conjure, de Bolla makes what is his most original contribution to the contemporary return to questions of the sublime as they pertain to theory as we know it today.

In terms of method and goals, de Bolla points out that a discursive network is distinct from a "discrete discourse" and the network of which it is a part" (9); this is what will lead him into a long discussion of the discourse *on* the sublime (which takes up certain experiences and sensations as excessive) as opposed to the discourse *of* the sublime ("which produces from within itself sublime experience") and as such enables the formation of a discursive network which has "no boundary" (12). The move from *on* to *of* allows a vision where aesthetics and economics are bound together in what Foucault might call an apparatus of power/knowledge.

That de Bolla's book is a self-acknowledged "high-wire act in process" makes it difficult to follow some of the many tasks at hand. The dangers of excess end up shadowing de Bolla's own work here. The excess from which he sees eighteenth-century theorists in flight is one which, if accounted for, would lay bare a "self-authenticating subjectivity," whereas it is the "absence of a self-narrative of the sublime" that suggests that any empowering of the self must be kept in check (70,295). The recognition of danger in excess produced by the sublime moves de Bolla from *on* to *of*—from the sublime as experience or effect to the sublime as an ideological network. Neighboring legislative discourses, like ethics in the early part of the eighteenth century, and later, psychology, support de Bolla's reading of resistances palpably harnessed by writers on the sublime.

In his reading of Burke, de Bolla avows that a recognition of this resistance was not available to theorists of the period since resistance produces from within itself the "transform[ation] from a discourse *on* to a discourse of the sublime." Burke's text, the one of de Bolla's three exemplars that we could consider canonical, is a starting place for this hunt for the "fissure within the discourse on the sublime through which a discourse of the sublime may leak and be perceived." The rhetorical strategy that lays bare the slippage is one of a "doubled structure of description [which] produces the emission we have seen labelled power." Rather than the sublime becoming, as it were, responsible for the excesses of its own generativity, for reasons acknowledged to be political, it becomes necessary instead for Burke's sublime to "reinstate the ultimate power of

an adjacent discourse, theology, which locates its own self-authenticating power firmly within the boundaries of godhead" (72).

Gerard's *Essay on Taste*, the text that serves to strengthen de Bolla's argument and also move it along, is as suggested by its title, one where the discourse on the sublime may not yet take account of itself and assume authority and authenticity. However, some of Gerard's footnotes, de Bolla argues, seem to lead him into the discourse of almost in spite of himself. Again de Bolla will follow a rhetorical strategy which, for Gerard, is the figure of primary and secondary distinction; this discursive analytic will find its impasse and boundary in the "moral sense, a weak and unconvincing closure to the problem" (90). At a certain moment de Bolla is surprised by how a footnote in Gerard encloses an entire unacknowledged theoretical framework. In the inevitable way that texts have of reproducing their own objects of study and their own problematic it comes as less of a surprise to find in the section on Gerard, a parenthetical remark about "(one of the founding lapses of eighteenth-century aesthetics)" which is the resistance to the analysis of subjectivity; surely this insight is the motor driving de Bolla's entire discursive machinery.

The self-policing discourse on and de Bolla's tracking of these gestures of power abnegating their own implications make him nod in the direction of Foucault as a model for his work; and although he acknowledges that his methods are different, his project could not have come to be without this "master" discourse. In an affinity with Foucault, de Bolla, too, asks the question of how a "discourse legislate[s] a practice" (15). It turns out that it is Kames in *Elements of Criticism* who, in his insistence on completeness in treating the sublime, manages to pass beyond these self-legislating moves into a more self-authenticating text; in de Bolla's scheme this text then becomes the site of a "theoretical discourse . . . coming into its own" (93). This is possible methodologically because Kames' work is driven by the rhetorical figure of splitting or mirroring and by a demand for closure which neither Burke nor Gerard had insisted upon. Kames represents a "self-aware, self-legitimizing theory" almost taxonomic in its "autotelic systematicity" (93). What matters most to de Bolla's scheme in using these three of some 6000 writings on the sublime from the eighteenth century is that Kames' critical articulation "enables the major turn from the discourse on to the discourse of," and thereby serves to open up de Bolla's study on the discourse of debt where the ideological imperatives toward comprehensiveness, completeness and closure (and away from excess) will prevail.

What finally emerges clearly in the discourse on the national debt is the analogy to the body, which tends to be masked by the discourse on the sublime (but not all that well); the discourse on debt may be open about its concern with a sense of national health and well-being as embodied in the individual. The discourse on the sublime and the debt can be seen to coincide when, in public discussions, the "creation of a national bank is put forward as the remedy for the disease within the public body" (128). With both

discourses—the sublime and the debt—the overriding, almost managerial, concern is with excess, surplus, loss and discharge. What results from this scrutiny is a discursive network which incorporates and unifies the subject/self/individual, and thereby the nation, in a move to have the one identify wholly with the other. It is on this note that Part I of de Bolla's book concludes.

A study of eighteenth-century theories of elocution, perspective, and novel reading constitutes Part II of the book. Discourse on these ways of knowing, performing, and being a subject provides further material to support de Bolla's thesis that the discourse of the sublime is the overarching structure for reading the signifying practices of subjectivity in the mid-eighteenth century. The "dominant informing movement is one from a voice-centered to a text-centered discursivity"—from the body and its public uses (elocution, or men reading) to the body in its private practices (novels, or women reading); that "fear of the text" which de Bolla locates also had its gendered inflections, warnings, and practices (147). Again, it is the management of potential excess that is at issue in the books on elocution; the urge to construct a proper public body emphasizes the creation of a unified subject who speaks properly, thereby also representing a unified national language/state.

This identification of the self with the nation is most clearly seen in de Bolla's fascinating discussion of the voice of William Pitt, the Great Commoner, the orator who speaks for liberty and who brings England into symbolic continuity with the Ancients. Pitt literally embodied the new emphasis on elocution as a public activity which involved decorum, legislation, and monitoring of excess. His position in the negotiation of peace with France, bringing to an end some of the excess (both warring and its spending) that was of such concern makes Pitt an exemplary figure through whose actions aspects of the discursive network converge: "The voice sublime, the voice that speaks all voices, that speaks with one voice for all voices, the voice of liberty" (145). In de Bolla's analysis of Pitt the connections between and among voice, body, self and nation are strung together in a manner almost as persuasive and compelling as Pitt, his subject, seems to have been. National specificity and its definitions were vehemently sought out and defended in the post-war period; foreign (French) terms were cast out and there was a triumph of the vernacular in educational theory. Such attentiveness to language and its manifestations is one of the ways we can see how the mythic figure of Pitt in life and after his death worked to embolden those who would bring glory to the state.

The "case history of the body in perspective theory" gives de Bolla the occasion to expand his chronological frame since he works here with texts across the eighteenth century. This opens up broadly ranging discussions of how the body is understood as representational, as well as the purposes and pleasures of representation itself. Contemporary theories of perspective pertained not only to the training of artists, but also to discussions of how to exhibit art, especially paintings. De Bolla tracks the legislative, and

finally, the more specifically gendered aspects of the body in/on view. Portrait painting was the most highly charged site of this policing of excess—both for the artist and the subject.

In a reading modeled on and as inspired as Foucault's discussion of Velasquez' "Las Meninas" in the opening section of *The Order of Things*, de Bolla explicates a painting of the period called "The Female Guardian." This "licentious portrait" is a representation of a woman sitting for a male painter while her maid reads; the maid, to the knowledge only of the artist, is, in fact, the subject of the painting in question. Her subjectivity, while openly subordinated to the lady in question, is furtively appropriated and put in the place of her mistress. As a reading of a powerfully suggestive, if commonplace, work on "the deceit involved in representation," de Bolla's entire enterprise comes into relief—here the many tasks he has set himself are all going on at once.

In the last section of Part II, on novel reading, gendered aspects of the discourse of the sublime, which until now had been kept primarily to the footnotes, emerge as pivotal. The reader's voice, the reader's body, and the text being read all become contested and surveyed sites of the management of excess. These early theories of reading are evidently moved by what he calls a "fear of the text" that picks up where the "obsession with the voice" of elocutionary theories left off. Eighteenth-century texts of reading theory are the locus of the most concrete evidence of the fear de Bolla connects to the earlier concerns with excess; these are books of literary writings which are accompanied by marginal notes and directions, sometimes including diagrams, of just how the reading subject should use his voice and hands in declaiming the text, in reading it aloud, whether in the privacy of the bed-chamber or in the public space of the drawing-room. These reading and performative instructions (theory/discourse legislating practice) serve to interrupt and defuse the "transport" that reading is meant to produce.

The scene of women reading defies theory since their doing so cannot be brought into the public discourse on the body and decorum. Reading, a practice meant to mime the author writing, leaves no space for the female reader; however, the transport produced is already dangerous for it also feminizes the male reader. Hence the volumes written and disseminated against the "effeminate" and "sentimental" pleasures of novel reading—a private affair where strict gender lines might be blurred if not crossed, if only in the mind of the one reading. Engagement with novels opens up the (female) subject, privately reading, to that same transport which can only be dangerous, titillating, and excessive. In the overriding concern with the propriety of what women are allowed to read, de Bolla finds an overdetermined effort to render invisible the male readers of "licentious" fictional narratives. The gendered aspects of the critique of the degenerate practice of too much novel reading become a way of policing feminized (fe/male) subjectivity, another name for the panic about excess that inhered in the monitoring of all parts of the discursive network of the sublime.

In an effort “to make theory confront its own imaginary,” de Bolla may be offering us a way to understand our contemporary scene where we find many ongoing explorations of the discursive knot *on* and *of* postmodernism. If so, it would be crucial to know whether, as de Bolla seems to imply at some moments, it is only we who can decipher the imaginary of the theoretical sublime due to our distance from it in space and time. If that is the case, then the omnipresence of the discourse *on* may always be obscuring what the discourse *of* would allow us to know of our own mirrors on theory.