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The Threshold of the Sublime: Standing in Awe and Fear in José María Heredia's "En el Teocalli de Cholula"

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ABSTRACT

My research explores the interactions between humans and nature as they appear in Cuban writer José María Heredia's prose poem "En el Teocalli de Cholula." I argue that María Heredia engages with the sublime by presenting a simultaneous awe and fear of nature. This analysis centers around a close reading of the selected poem and draws from Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant's conceptualizations of the sublime and contemporary, eco-critical approaches of Allen Carlson and Noël Carroll. Burke distinguishes between the beautiful and the sublime in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, but Kant provides a more critical and complex definition of the sublime in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, a more acute definition I use in my reading of María Heredia's poem. In "Appreciation and the Natural Environment" Carlson offers three, near-emotionless, ways of viewing the aesthetics of nature while Carroll adds the importance of emotion to Carlson's preferred model of appreciation in *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*. From this paper, readers will come to recognize that if they were to stand and look onto el Teocalli de Cholula, they too would be in the presence of the sublime. This research is significant as it crosses temporal and geographical boundaries to better understand the unique human experience of the sublime.

The interaction and relationships between humans and nature are timeless. Nature provides, sustains, and predicts how humans live. There are unexpected and certain times when nature is stunning – capturing and recounting these moments is nearly impossible, though some artists and writers can capture the sublime: an awe-inspiring excellence. The German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich exposes sublime elements of nature in his landscape paintings, especially in the well-known work *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. José María Heredia is a poet who similarly attempts to recreate the indescribable experience of nature. In this paper, I will draw from Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant's conceptualizations of the sublime from their 18th century Enlightenment texts and pair these conceptualizations with the contemporary, eco-

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critical perspectives of Allen Carlson and Noël Carroll. I will apply these conceptualizations and arguments in my close reading of José María Heredia's prose poem "En el Teocalli de Cholula." In brief, I will argue that María Heredia engages with the sublime by invoking a simultaneous awe and fear of nature. Furthermore, readers of the poem will come to recognize that if they were to stand and look onto el Teocalli de Cholula, they too would be in the presence of the sublime.

Cuban-born José María Heredia (1803-1839) died young and full of passion. After the Cuban government exiled José Maria Heredia from the country in 1823, accusing him of an alleged plot against Spain's colonial government, he spent the rest of his short life living and working in Mexico and America (Glover 78). María Heredia's works fall into the Romantic era of South American literature because of their distinctive tropes, which Glover articulates as: "the exaltation of passion over reason, a fascination with ruins, the importance of nature, [and] the preeminence of the individual ego" (78).

María Heredia published "En el Teocalli de Cholula" in 1822. The Náhuatl definition of *teocalli* is "house of a god" and in Spanish, it is defined as a "templo de los antiguos nahuas de México." Translated to English, teocalli is a temple for the Nahua people's ancestors who settled in what is now modern-day Mexico and El Salvador. One town that these natives occupied was Cholula; it is surrounded by large volcanoes and sits in the modern-day state of Puebla, Mexico. Nature, in the form of volcanoes, encompasses both the temple and the town of Cholula; the temple, a man-made object, literally sits in nature. The accrued human history, especially the battles fought and rulers' reigns, in the natural area surrounding the temple and the title "On the Teocalli of Cholula" draws attention to the interaction between nature and humankind, and presents the temple as the subject of the poem.

In this paper, I will explore the continuous interplay between humans and nature through a reading of María Heredia's poem. First, I will contextualize my approach through an in-depth investigation on what the sublime is and how we as humans experience it, with reference to 18th century philosophers Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. Second, I will present a close reading of María Heredia's poem to examine how the ebb and flow pattern of the magnificent (awe) and hostile (fear) descriptions of nature suggest a sublime encounter when a human views el Teocalli de Cholula. Third, I will explore and apply Allen Carlson and Noël Carroll's contemporary works surrounding the appreciation of nature to demonstrate how María Heredia involves something larger than the sublime, that is, the idea that humans must appreciate the nature that surrounds us because our interaction with nature determines how we as a species will continue to live.

Before delving into a possible sublime experience in a text, we must establish a clear definition of the sublime. For this definition, we turn to two 18th century philosophers, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant; Burke makes the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime and Kant expands Burke's definition and explores different occurrences of the sublime.

In his 1757 work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke defines the difference between the beautiful and the sublime. Burke argues that experiencing both the beautiful and the sublime come from the feelings of pain and pleasure.[1]

Throughout his work, Burke associates beauty with love "or some passion similar to it" and the sublime with danger (162). Burke discusses how pain and pleasure can both have positive effects: "pain and pleasure, in their most simple and natural manner of affecting, are each of positive nature, and by no means necessarily dependent on each other for their existence" (44). Of course, the sublime is not an experience of pure and extreme pain, but rather it is an encounter with something just near it (60). The sublime is different from the merely beautiful. Burke defines the sublime as "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime, that is it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (58-9).

We see the pain and the pleasure of the sublime in "En el Teocalli de Cholula" as the narrator is experiencing it. Stanza five provides a source of the narrator's familiarity with the sublime. María Heredia writes how "the shadow from Popcatépetl slowly/reached out and spread forth resembling/a colossal phantasm. The shaded arc/finally touched me, covering me,/its grandeur grew and grew until at last/it veiled the earth in its cosmic shade" (68-73).[2] The narrator feels excitement when the black shadow of the volcano covers him, a kind of terror, as Burke would say, but the volcano is too sublime for him to look away.

In his 1764 work *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant works with the juxtaposition of the beautiful and the sublime; Kant argues that one must feel beauty to feel the sublime and must know the sublime to know beauty.[3] Kant elaborates upon Burke's definition of the sublime by articulating how the sublime and the beautiful need each other in order to exist. While Burke shows the beautiful and the sublime as distinct, for Kant, the beautiful and the sublime entail one another. Kant gives examples of what the sublime is and what the beautiful is, as shown here:

> The finer feeling that we will now consider is preeminently of two kinds: the feeling of the sublime and of the beautiful. Being touched by either is agreeable, but in very different ways. The sight of a mountain whose snow-covered peaks arise about the clouds, the description of a raging storm, or the depiction of the kingdom of hell by Milton arouses satisfaction, but with dread; by contrast, the prospect of meadows strewn with flowers, of valleys with winding brooks, covered with grazing herds, the description of Elysium, or Homer's depiction of the girdle of Venus also occasion an agreeable sentiment, but one that is joyful and smiling. (14-6)

In short, "the night is sublime, the day is beautiful" (16). Kant even separates the sublime into three distinct categories: the terrifying – "accompanied with some dread or even melancholy," the noble – "quiet admiration," and the magnificent – "beauty spread over a sublime prospect" (16).

"En el Teocalli de Cholula" thus also plays with Kant's understanding of the sublime with the narrator's continued description of Popocatépetl in stanza five. The narrator knows and expresses that he is in the presence of the sublime; as Kant describes, "the sublime must always be large" whereas the beautiful is usually small (17). María Heredia writes, "I turned my eyes to the sublime

volcano,/which, visible through a foggy curtain/in the western sky, was outlining/the contours of its immense design" (74-7).[4] This concise application of the sublime in María Heredia's work is only the beginning.

In summary, in this prose poem, José María Heredia employs an ebb and flow pattern between magnificent and hostile descriptions, correlating to the awe and fear of nature; this pattern distinguishes the simply beautiful from the sublime. This characteristic factor showcases the interplay among the beautiful, the sublime, and the resulting emotion, as Kant suggests. The give and take relationship between humans and nature that María Heredia forms suggests whoever views el Teocalli de Cholula will be in the presence of the sublime. The following section of this paper will delve into the give and take relationship through an analysis of selected passages.

The second half of the first stanza begins to show the ebb and flow pattern characteristic of María Heredia's "En el Teocalli de Cholula." This passage provides both outstanding and intimidating imagery; in addition, this passage also introduces the juxtaposition of humans and nature. By examining specific capitalization, key vocabulary, connotation, and metaphor, readers find that the experience of viewing el Teocalli de Cholula is sublime.

This first passage illuminates the distinction between humans and nature with the descriptions of the "Indian" and "Nature" with a capital N. María Heredia introduces the Indian by writing, "the Indian/happily watches them turn to hues/of light purple and gold" (16-8).[5] Though the English translation capitalizes the word "Indian" and some readers may find this of significance, the reason that this happens is simply because of translation. In English, words for naming a certain set of people – such as the Native Americans or Indians – are capitalized; this capitalization is not done in the Spanish language and in the original version it is written "el indio" (16). However, the English translation also capitalizes the word "Nature" (Spanish: la naturaleza). María Heredia writes that the sun "saw Nature deeply moved and stirred/to teeming life by its sweetly gentle heat" (22-3).[6] This is an unusual capitalization in the English translation, and because it is in the first stanza, it draws attention to the natural element that will exist throughout the poem. While these words are not capitalized in the original version, it is an appropriate choice for the English translation because of the weight the María Heredia places on the Indian, thus human, and Nature. By contrasting the Indian with Nature, María Heredia creates two distinct camps that each of his carefully selected words will fall into: humans and nature. However, these two categories are not opposing; they are different, but intertwined just as Kant would say the beautiful and the sublime are intertwined.

The descriptions of the awe of nature in this first passage are wonderful and allude to a metaphoric young, virgin heir or heiress. Through specific word choice in his description of the volcanoes, the fields, and the sun, María Heredia executes this extended metaphor. First, María Heredia writes about the mountains: "Eternal snows crown the heads/of purest Iztacihuatl, Orizaba/and Popocatépetl" (12-4).[7] Here, María Heredia uses the words "crowned" and "purest" which both suggest that the volcanoes, representative of nature, are both royal and untainted. Then, María Heredia describes the fields as "fertile" and "[turning] to hues/of light purple and gold" (16-8).[8] "Fertile" shows that, along with nature being pure, it is also able to produce just as

a queen or king can produce another ruler for an empire. "[Turning] to hues/of light purple and gold" creates an image of the clothes and jewelry a queen or king would wear as purple is traditionally a color of royal value. Finally, María Heredia writes that the sun pours out its golden light (19, 21) from the sky.[9] This is another use of metaphoric language that alludes to royalty; the rays of the sun, which are golden and pour out across the land, look very similar to a King or Queen's crown. The metaphoric language and allusion created with the description of the volcanoes, fields, and sun magnificently illuminate the awe of nature, as nature is a being that encompasses everything humans could need.

On the other hand, hostile imagery appears in this passage with repetition and metaphoric language. First, the repetition of "eternal" snow and ice, appearing in the beginning and end of the passage, creates a cold and undesirable feeling towards nature. In the beginning, María Heredia writes "Eternal snow crowns the heads of" three famous volcanoes: Iztaccíhuatl, Orizaba, and Popocatepetl (12-4).[10] This excerpt generates the idea that the mountains are cold and unwelcoming to visitors because even during spring, summer, and fall there is snow in sight and the visitors can feel the chilly weather. The repetition continues when María Heredia writes that the western sun pours its golden light onto "eternal ice" (19-21).[11] The contrast between the grand sun and the eternal ice creates unfriendly imagery; the sun has golden light, but shines onto ice. The eternal snow and ice produce a hostile environment, and show the fear of nature that humans have because very few people can survive in this location. The repetition of the word "eternal" also creates fear and anxiety. Repetition of "eternal" constantly draws attention to the infinite nature of the situation the narrator is in, stimulating fear and anxiety. These feelings only add to the pain that one might have or experience in the presence of el Teocalli de Cholula. The fear that María Heredia shows his readers contributes to the sublime feeling that humans feel in the presence of el Teocalli de Cholula. The beautiful and the dangerous work together here to create Kant's conceptualization of the terrifying sublime. The seemingly infinite expanse of the moment, facing so much ice and snow when looking upon el Teocalli de Cholula instills a sense of "dread or melancholy" that Kant says are necessary to experience a sublime encounter (16).

María Heredia uses another piece of hostile language when he alludes to the force of winter as a higher power. After his description of the volcanoes, María Heredia writes that "winter,/with its destructive hands, never touches/their [the mountains'] extremely fertile fields" (14-6).[12] This excerpt shows the sublime by contrasting the beautiful volcanoes and fields with winter's "destructive hands." Volcanoes themselves are sublime because they also have the capacity to kill – both humans and nature – when they explode. The use of winter as a juxtaposition to el teocalli de Cholula in María Heredia's poem creates the sublime. Kant would say that summer and spring are simply beautiful, just as the day is beautiful, and that winter is sublime, just as the night is sublime. Winter instills fear as it watches with its destructive hands, but the volcanoes invoke beauty because of the "extremely fertile fields" that grow on their sides; readers can envision a sublime scenario from this short excerpt.

Through multiple layers of comparisons and levels of analysis we know that the interaction between humans and nature is sublime. By first analyzing the use of magnificent and hostile descriptions, we find that nature must have pleasurable qualities for it to be beautiful and added

painful or terrible qualities to make it sublime. There are fertile and pure fields but only because there are also places with eternal snow and ice. As we see in the writing about contact between the Indian and Nature, it is the interplay between humans and nature that is truly sublime.

The third stanza introduces the first-person narrator who can be seen as an opposing figure or foil to el Teocalli de Cholula, which makes the relationship between humans and nature all the more apparent. Without the first-person narrator, there would be nothing sublime about this poem. Furthermore, without a human history and human perspective of nature, the natural element cannot be sublime. With the presence of a first-person, human narrator, readers know the human history that exists with el Teocalli de Cholula and therefore can experience it as sublime. The third stanza begins with "I found myself sitting atop the famous/pyramid of Cholula. Stretching out/at my feet was the vast unmatched plain/inviting my eyes to a sumptuous feast" (42-5).[13] The narrator seems to be a foil to the el Teocalli de Cholula because he is the human among nature.

In addition to the first-person narrator, the immediate juxtaposition of the beautiful fields and the events that occurred in these fields in the third stanza of "En el Teocalli de Cholula" reflect a turning point in the poem. The fields are a direct part of the ebb and flow pattern María Heredia uses throughout his poem, and this juxtaposition demonstrates that it takes both humans and nature to create a sublime interaction. María Heredia refers to these cornfields in the third stanza as "beautiful" (48).[14] It is important that nature itself is what highlights the positive aspect of this stanza because it sets the stage for this land to be sublime. Furthermore, the actions taken on this land, for example murder and colonization, instill the slight fear that creates a sublime experience.

Without this fear and accompanying feelings of melancholy, the fields and el Teocalli de Cholula would be solely beautiful. These hostile descriptions are found in immediate juxtaposition to the description of the lovely fields and make three appearances: "barbarous oppression," "blood of men," and the inundation of "ancient superstition and by war" (47-51). First, María Heredia writes that it was in the fields where "barbarous oppression once reigned" (47).[15] The close-knit contrast between the beautiful fields and the negative events that occurred there speaks directly to the awe and fear that nature instills in people; these fields provide both a striking place to view nature and an open space where oppression can rise up and rule. Additionally, these rich cornfields were "manured/by human blood" (49-50).[16] This addresses the interplay of the awe and fear of nature; in order for the people to have something beautiful, such as the cornfields, they must pay for it with something awful, such as the bloodshed of fellow man. The war that María Heredia speaks of may be representative of the colonization of South America by the Spanish and Portuguese. Because the Cuban government exiled María Heredia from Cuba, he may have felt the need to empathize with the native people who built el Teocalli de Cholula by representing it in a sublime light. This may have stemmed from his perceived similarity with the native people as his government mistreated him just as the Spanish colonizers did the natives. With this knowledge, the experience of the fields and el Teocalli de Cholula can be more than extraordinary. These examples show on a grander scale that one standing in the fields before el Teocalli de Cholula is in company with more than simple beauty, but in the presence of the sublime.

Now that we know in the presence of el Teocalli de Cholula one experiences a sublime place, we must consider how one can appreciate the nature that provides so much for humans. For this we turn to two contemporary authors, Allen Carlson and Noël Carroll. Carlson writes about three models of appreciation that viewers apply to nature and Carroll builds on Carlson's work by attaching emotion to appreciation.

In his work "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," Carlson discusses how to appreciate the nature that surrounds humans. Carlson presents three ways (models) of appreciation: object, landscape or scenery, and environmental; ultimately he argues that the environmental model is the most effective way of appreciating nature.

Carlson offers these models of appreciation because traditional modes of appreciation as applied to "art cannot be applied to the natural environment without at least some modification" (268). For Carlson, the object model of appreciation applies to objects that are "self-contained aesthetic units" such as sculptures (268). Eventually, Carlson concludes that the object model is not an acceptable way of appreciating nature because "in either case [removed object or not] the object model does not provide a successful paradigm for the aesthetic appreciation of nature" (269). Here, Carlson explains that you cannot appreciate nature by removing it from its home; for example, you cannot fully appreciate a piece a driftwood that sits on your mantel because the driftwood is no longer on the beach. The next model that Carlson discusses is the landscape, or scenery, model which landscape painting exemplifies. In this model, "when aesthetically appreciating landscape paintings […] the representation of the object and its represented features" is the focus (270). Yet, Carlson once again concludes that this model is an inappropriate manner in which to appreciate nature given that the landscape "model requires the appreciation of the environment not as what it is and with the qualities it has, but rather as something it is not and with qualities it does not have" (271). The landscape model was used often during the time of Caspar David Friedrich where painters represented nature in the way they saw it, not how it actually was; therefore, it cannot be a true appreciation of nature. The third, and preferred, way of appreciating nature is Carlson's environmental model. Carlson defines the environment as "the setting in which we exist as a 'sentient part'; it is our surroundings […] If any one part of it becomes obtrusive, it is in danger of being seen as an object or a scene, not as our environment" (271). Carlson decides that this model is the way to appreciate nature and we must do so by "[experiencing] our background setting in all those ways in which we normally experience it, by sight, smell, touch, and whatever. However, we must experience [it] not as unobtrusive background, but as obtrusive foreground!" (272).

Carlson's environmental model of appreciation reflects the narrator's perspective, that is, the view, thoughts, and feelings of the narrator in María Heredia's poem, and allows contemporary readers to relate to "En el Teocalli de Cholula." We find that the narrator of the poem seems to use the environmental model to appreciate el Teocalli de Cholula especially when the narrator takes in the entire setting from a high vantage point where a "vast unmatched plain/invit[ed his] eyes to a sumptuous feast" (44-5).[17] The narrator takes in the plains as a whole and sees them as an obtrusive foreground.

In his chapter "On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History" from his work *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*, Carroll proposes – mainly in response to Carlson – a refined way to appreciate nature. Carroll's main focus is the emotional connection – what he describes as being emotionally aroused – that humans have with nature in order to appreciate it (369). Carroll writes, "The emotions aroused by nature that concern me can be fully secular and have no call to be demystified as displaced religious sentiment. That is, being moved by nature is a mode of nature appreciation that is available between science and religion" (370). Whereas Carlson tries to secularize the appreciation of nature because emotion puts too much emphasis on the object and landscape models, Carroll emphasizes the importance of the emotion in appreciation. Carroll sees the significance of the environmental model, but argues that we must have emotions and feelings towards the environment one is viewing in order to truly appreciate it.

Indeed, the first-person narration in "En el Teocalli de Cholula" demonstrates the human arousal of emotion that Carroll argues cannot be forgotten when we appreciate the nature that surrounds us. The combination of immersing the reader in the surrounding fields while looking onto el Teocalli de Cholula and María Heredia's diction accentuate the environmental model of appreciation that Carlson advocates as the most effective way of appreciating nature. María Heredia's poem reveals both pain and pleasure as positive emotions like Burke illustrates, but the poem distinguishes between the beautiful and sublime – how they entail one another – in the manner that Kant philosophizes. Even though Friedrich and María Heredia were contemporaries, having produced *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* and "En el Teocalli de Cholula," respectively, within five years of each other, they represent the sublime in radically different ways. Friedrich paints in the manner traditional to the Enlightenment period wherein the sublime excites feelings of danger, and the landscape model confines the sublime – just as the frame confines the painting itself. María Heredia, by contrast, builds past the Enlightenment, and even the Romantic, ideas of the sublime, composing a piece that allows even present-day readers to contemplate their appreciation and therefore their relationship to nature. Readers, and hence humans, must have an emotional appreciation for nature as it will be nature that governs how we will continue to live on this Earth.

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NOTES

[1] The most relevant sections are: "Pain and Pleasure," "Of the Sublime," and "Of Beauty."
[2] Original: "con lentitud la sombra se extendía/del Popocatepec, y semejaba/fantasma colosal. El arco oscuro/a mí llegó, cubriome, y su grandeza/fue mayor y mayor, hasta que al cabo/en sombra universal veló la tierra" (68-73).
[3] The most important section from Kant is his first section, "On the distinct object of the feeling for the sublime and the beautiful."
[4] Original: "Volví los ojos al volcán sublime,/que velado en vapores transparentes,/sus inmensos contornos dibujada/de occidente en el cielo" (74-7).
[5] Original: "Los mira el indio en púrpura ligera" (17).
[6] Original: "y vio a naturaleza conmovida/con su dulce calor hervir en vida" (22-3).
[7] Original: "Nieve eternal corona las cabezas/de Iztaccíhuatl purísimo, Orizaba/y Popocatépetl" (12-4).
[8] Original: "Los campos fertilísimos" (16) "en púrpura ligera/y oro teñirse" (17-8).
[9] Original: "Del sol en occidente… vertió su luz dorada" (19-21).
[10] Original: "Nieve eternal corona las cabezas/de Iztaccihual purísimo, Orizaba/y Popocatepetl, sin que el invierno" (12-4).
[11] Original: "Del sol en occidente, que sereno/en hielo eterno y perennal verdura/a torrentes vertió su luz dorada" (19-21).
[12] Original: "sin que el invierno/toque jamás con destructora mano/los campos fertilísimos" (14-6).
[13] Original: "Hallábame sentado en la famosa/Choluteca pirámide. Tendido/el llano inmenso que ante mí yacía,/los ojos a esparciarse convidaba" (42-5).
[14] Original: "bellos campos" (47).
[15] Original: "reina alzada/la bárbara opresión" (47-8).
[16] Original: "Con sangre de hombres" (50).
[17] Original: "el llano inmenso que ante mí yacía,/los ojos a espaciarse convidaba" (44-5).