Encounters with the Feminine Sublime in Clarice Lispector’s *Uma aprendizagem ou O livro dos prazeres* and Cristina Rivera Garza’s *La cresta de Ilión*

Rebecca R. Garonzik

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Approved by:
Dr. Juan Carlos González Espitia
Dr. Oswaldo Estrada
Dr. Monica Rector
ABSTRACT

REBECCA R. GARONZIK: Encounters with the Feminine Sublime in Clarice Lispector’s *Uma aprendizagem ou O livro dos prazeres* and Cristina Rivera Garza’s *La cresta de Ilión* (Under the direction of Juan Carlos González Espitia)

This study uses Barbara Claire Freeman’s theory of the feminine sublime and Thomas Weiskel’s theory of the Romantic sublime as a theoretical framework to explore the feminine sublime and its manifestations in *Uma aprendizagem ou O livro dos prazeres* (1969) by Clarice Lispector (1920-1977) and *La cresta de Ilión* (2002) by Cristina Rivera Garza (1964-). My analysis of Lispector’s *Uma aprendizagem*, shows that both the Romantic and feminine sublimes are manifested in the protagonist’s journey of self-discovery and in the novel’s elusive textual style, and identifies the role of heterosexuality as a dominant paradigm in the text. I also demonstrate the way in which, in *La cresta de Ilión*, Rivera Garza re-visits the themes of self-discovery and the feminine sublime from within the context of contemporary gender theory, in effect transforming—or queering—this mainstay of feminist literature.
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CHAPTER 1
An Introduction to the Theory of the Sublime

The sublime is a concept with an extremely far-reaching history and, as a result, it has been subject to a wide variety of theorizations and interpretations. This chapter provides an overview of several of these theorizations, as well as of other theoretical elements that lend themselves to an analysis of Uma aprendizagem and La cresta de Ilión. I introduce the basic features of these theories here, and will develop their more complex features in later chapters as they figure in my analysis of the novels themselves.

In The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence (1976), Thomas Weiskel delineates the re-discovery and spread of the idea of the sublime during the eighteenth century, and its full-scale development as the Romantic sublime during the Romantic period. Weiskel explains that it was the anxiety of modernism, which he defines as “an incurable ambivalence about authority,” that opened the door to a re-discovery of the Longinian sublime originally developed in Perì Hýpsous (On the Sublime), which is commonly attributed to the Greek rhetorician Longinus (100 AD) (8). Whereas literature during the neo-classical period had largely been governed by the concept of translatio and an adherence to rules extracted from classical texts, as well as “the authority of priority conferred on past poets by the immensity of their achievement” (8), poets during the Romantic period developed a mistrust of authority in keeping with the prevailing mindset of European modernism. As Weiskel explains: “What is new in modernism is an opposition, latent at first, but unavoidable, between authority and authenticity, between imitation, the
traditional route to authentic identity, and originality, impossible but necessary” (8). In this environment, Longinus’s *Peri Hýpsous*, which argues the need for genius, or originality, as well as *techné*, or technique, resonated with and was easily adopted as a critical program among poets of the day. Access to the sublime held forth the possibility, not only of originality, but also of achieving greatness equal to, if not transcending, that of past poets. Moreover, “the close association of the natural and the transcendent, or super-human . . . made the vision readily assimilable in the changing culture of eighteenth century England” (12).

In defining the Romantic sublime, Weiskel stipulates that it “is not only or even primarily Longinian” (5), and that it was equally influenced by the natural sublime, which equated characteristics traditionally associated with a divine presence to the vastness of space and immense natural phenomena and designated the “sensible imagination” as the primary means of access to that presence (14). Although Weiskel acknowledges that “the natural sublime [developed] independently of literary influence” (14), he argues against making an excessive distinction between the natural sublime and the rhetorical/Longinian sublime, claiming that “aesthetic speculation in the eighteenth century was enthusiastically eclectic” and that these two theoretical versions of the sublime are therefore closely interrelated. The development of the natural sublime was a result of the growth of empiricism in the form of Lockean, or associationist, psychology, which claimed that “the only route to the intellect,” to God, and to the soul “lies through the senses” (14). Therefore, so that human beings could still access the divine, attributes typically associated with divinity were re-ascribed to the natural world: “the emotions traditionally religious,” particularly numinousness, “were displaced from the Deity and became associated first with the immensity of space and
secondarily with the natural phenomena (oceans, mountains) which seemed to approach that immensity” (14). Eventually, in an internalization of this same concept, vast and/or immense natural phenomena were taken as superior conduits for the sublime because they were seen as more capable of reflecting the vastness of the human soul (14). At the same time, the sublime came to be associated with “the vague and the obscure” (16), or, more specifically, with the difficulty faced in confronting “the necessary discontinuities in the classical scheme of signification . . . in the inexplicable passage between one order of discourse and another” (17).

The sublime moment that appears in the respective philosophies of Edmund Burke (1729-1797) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) developed from this idea of a confrontation with and supercession of the inexplicable. In A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757), Edmund Burke formulated the idea of the sublime as a means of overcoming the boredom and anxiety seen to characterize the modern condition in order to attain a heightened state of consciousness (Weiskel 18). For Burke, the sublime functions as a “homeopathic . . . cure” of the anxiety of absence “by means of the stronger, more concentrated—but momentary—anxiety involved in astonishment and terror” (18). Although Kant does not concern himself with the psychological ramifications of sublime experience, instead focusing on its implications for the power of reason, his philosophy also centers around the state of perplexity inspired by immense natural phenomena. The sublime encounter as it appears in Kant’s Critique of Judgment (1790) occurs in three stages. In the first stage, the mind is in a state of “normal perception or comprehension” characterized by a “determinate relation to the object” of perception (Weiskel 23). In the second stage, this relation between the mind and its object is disrupted as
a result of the mind’s having perceived an object that exceeds comprehension, which produces a “disconcerting disproportion between inner and outer” (23-4). In the third stage, commonly referred to as the sublime turn, the mind restores the determinate relation between itself and the object of perception through the use of reason, which enables the mind to comprehend the object as a unity, even if it cannot actually be perceived as such. Thus, for Kant, the sublime encounter ultimately serves as “a symbol of the mind’s relation” to reason as “a transcendent order” (23).

In keeping with the idea of mutual influence between various manifestations of the Romantic sublime, Weiskel proposes a semiotic theory of the dialectic of signification that accounts for both rhetorical and natural definitions of sublimity—correlating the sublime that is typically associated with the Romantic poets with what he identifies as the metonymical or poet’s sublime, and Kant’s mathematical sublime with the metaphorical or hermeneutical/reader’s sublime.¹ Weiskel defines each of these two versions of sublimity in linguistic terms—as an excess of either the signified or the signifier. The former, which Weiskel dubs the metonymical sublime, is characterized by an excess of meaning: “Here, meaning is overwhelmed by an overdetermination which in its extreme threatens a state of absolute metaphor”; it is a moment in which “the word dissolves into the Word” (26; 27). In order to counteract the potential “death by plenitude” occasioned by the metonymical sublime, the poet responds by spreading this excess of meaning “along the syntagmatic chain,” or “displacing” the excess signified onto a series of related signifiers, thereby disrupting the stasis threatened by this version of the sublime (27).² By contrast, the metaphorical sublime is characterized by an excess of signifiers whose meaning “cannot be grasped or understood”; as examples Weiskel mentions “theological mysteries and allegories.
without an evident ‘key’” (29; Goodman as qtd. in Weiskel 29). In this version of the sublime “the absence of a signified itself assumes the status of a signifier, disposing us to feel that behind this newly significant absence lurks a newly discovered presence” (28). In other words, we experience the metaphorical sublime as highly significant or meaningful, even if it boasts a meaning to which we will never obtain access.

Weiskel follows this elaboration of the metonymical/poet’s sublime and the metaphorical/reader’s sublime by stipulating that “the modal opposition here adumbrated has no value whatsoever as a scheme for classifying poets and texts” since “all readers are poets in some degree, and all poets are also readers” (31). However, I find his descriptions of the metonymical and metaphorical sublimes useful for characterizing Lispector’s and Rivera Garza’s respective writing styles, and for comparing them with the writers that Weiskel designates as examples—namely William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Franz Kafka (1883-1924)—in order to locate them within an extended history of sublime poetics.

In addition to Weiskel’s semiotic theory of the sublime, I will be working closely with Barbara Claire Freeman’s elaboration of the feminine sublime in her work The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction (1995). The feminine sublime, as developed by Freeman, is a relationship to the sublime that she has elucidated from depictions of the sublime in both foundational and contemporary women’s fiction, including Kate Chopin’s The Awakening (1899), Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse (1927), Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera (1987), and Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987). For the purpose of this thesis I am most interested in her general conclusions regarding the role of the feminine sublime in women’s fiction, as well as her analysis of the feminine sublime in The
Awakening, in which she equates the sublime with both the ocean itself, and with the sound of the ocean’s waves.

For Freeman, as for most other theorists of the sublime, the sublime is “an excess that resists the attempt to translate sheer heterogeneity into a univocal message,” as well as a “silence” that “stresses the impossibility of paraphrasing the singularity and particularity of its voice” (35). However, unlike Kantian conceptions of the sublime as an excess that man uses reason to resist, thereby confirming his identity as a unified subject, the subject’s encounter with the feminine sublime is not one of resistance, but rather one of voluntarily “self-dispersal” or self-loss (Freeman 19). In her analysis of the feminine sublime in The Awakening, Freeman writes that Edna’s first swim “does not represent a struggle for dominance over a force that . . . has the power to engulf her, but rather . . . allows a relation to ‘the unlimited’ in which she seeks ‘to lose herself’” (31). Moreover, because the subject’s encounter with the sublime is freely chosen rather than imposed, this act of self-dispersal functions as a source of empowerment. Unlike the Longinian and Romantic formulations of the sublime, the feminine sublime articulates “the deployment of agency to intensify and underscore the wish for dispossession, and to recognize in the scene of self-dispersal a site of self-empowerment” (19; my emphasis).

Freeman’s treatment of the subject’s encounter with the sublime in women’s fiction, in turn, reflects back on the way in which the sublime has traditionally been conceptualized. Whereas traditional formulations of the sublime, including the natural sublime, the Kantian sublime, and the Romantic sublime, have involved “a self that maintains its borders by subordinating difference and by appropriating rather than identifying with that which presents itself as other” (4), Freeman’s analysis of the subject’s encounter with the sublime
as one of voluntary self-dispersal or dispossession reaffirms a notion of the sublime as an excess that cannot be rationalized or resisted, and that therefore confounds any attempts to clearly demarcate self from other. While arguing with regard to traditional conceptualizations of the sublime that “what appears to be a theory of how excess works actually functions to keep it at bay” (4), Freeman herself offers an elaboration of the sublime that delivers on the promise of irrationality and inscrutability pregnant in the concept of excess (39).

While I will be relying primarily on Barbara Claire Freeman’s conception of the feminine sublime, I will also be referring to Patricia Yaeger’s formulation of the feminine sublime, as well as Christine Battersby’s theory of the female sublime, for the way in which each of these conceives of the sublime in relation to the act of maternity and the female body. In her essay “The ‘Language of Blood’: Towards a Maternal Sublime” (1993), Patricia Yaeger performs a psychoanalytic analysis of maternity and childbirth as the sublime element of women’s fiction. Drawing on the work of Julia Kristeva, Yaeger argues that female generativity, as an experience which heightens one’s awareness of “the noumenal/biological power of the female self” (89), should be considered an experience of sublimity. Yaeger locates the sublimity of childbirth, not only in the experience of the woman giving birth, but in that of her onlookers as well. Quoting from Kristeva, Yaeger writes that “fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing” (92), and which Yaeger theorizes as the maternal sublime.

Unlike Freeman’s feminine sublime, Yaeger’s theory of the feminine and/or maternal sublime ultimately upholds the masculine self-other binary found in traditional formulations of sublimity. For Yaeger, the sublime still “always reflects a power struggle” and is
experienced as an alienation between the self and the world which the self eventually surmounts (99). Nevertheless, Yaeger’s conceptualization of the feminine sublime is useful for its psychoanalytic component, and in that in enables us to move away from the strict “spatial prerogative” of the masculine sublime in order to embrace alternatively gendered formulations of sublimity—formulations that take into account the sublime potential of the generative female body. In discussing Mary Oliver’s poem “The Fish,” Yaeger writes that “when Oliver describes parturition as that moment when ‘mortality drives triumphantly toward / immortality,’ while ‘the shaken bones’ become ‘cages of fire,’ the grace of the ordinary body becomes extraordinary, and we find ourselves in a region between finitude and infinitude” (98). Through this analysis, one recognizes as Yaeger does that “the maternal sublime can . . . represent another, more bodily origin in which grotesque and sublime cease to be oppositional—as the woman writer speaks in a ‘language of blood’ to re-articulate and praise our bodily beginnings” (101).

In The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference (2007), Christine Battersby presents a theory of the female sublime that integrates the differently formulated feminine sublimes of Barbara Freeman and Patricia Yaeger. Although Battersby does not acknowledge her indebtedness to either Freeman or Yaeger, like Yaeger, she locates the female sublime in the generative potential of the female body. Rather than taking Yaeger’s lead in reinstating the self-other dichotomy of the traditional masculine sublime, however, Battersby adopts Freeman’s application of the Irigarayan ‘economy of the gift’ to the sublime encounter, producing a meeting in which “self and other are not oppositional” (129). Since the sublime encounter is no longer framed as one of conflict, there is no longer a power struggle between the subject and an excess that is attempting to overwhelm and consume it. As in Freeman’s
feminine sublime, in Battersby’s female sublime it is no longer necessary for the self to reassert its autonomy through the traditional sublime turn: “there are no ‘blockages’ that build up as the flows are damned up; and since there are no structures of domination, there is also no repression, and no sudden release” (129).

Particularly important to Battersby, and one way in which her female sublime differs from Freeman’s feminine sublime, is her sublime’s designation as female rather than feminine. For Battersby, this distinction connotes the specificity of women’s gendered experience, as well as the materiality of the female body. Unlike Freeman, for whom the term feminine “does not so much refer to actual women” as to “the formulation of an alternative position with respect to excess and the possibilities of its figuration” (10), Battersby’s conceptualization of the female sublime is very much concerned with actual women in thinking “the normality of the body that can give birth,” and “[ theorizing ] . . . the relationship between I and its ‘other’ who is—or might be—found embodied within” (102). According to Battersby, the female sublime, which considers the self-other relationship in relation to the specificity of the generative female body, has the power to “[threaten] the ‘truth’ of the psychic (oedipal) ‘universals’ underlying our experience of nature, infinity and ‘otherness’” (130).

In addition to the tension that we see in the above theories of the female/feminine sublimes, for the purpose of analyzing Rivera Garza’s La cresta de Ilión, I will also need to address the tension that exists between much of foundational feminist theory and contemporary gender theory around the notions of gender-as-ontology versus gender-as-performance. The two theorists that I will primarily be referring to within this thesis to represent each of these two discourses are Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler. In my reading of
Rivera Garza’s novel, I will also refer to Laura Mulvey’s theory of the gaze, which I develop further in the course of that chapter.

Regarding the influence of Luce Irigaray (1932-), as I mentioned previously, both Barbara Freeman and Christine Battersby draw on Irigaray’s gift economy in their respective conceptualizations of the feminine/female sublimes in order to theorize the nature of an encounter with the female/feminine sublime as one of relationality rather than one of antagonism. The economy of the gift emerges from Irigaray’s larger goal of creating a counter-text to the patriarchal tenets of Freudian psychoanalysis by theorizing a feminine imaginary based on the economy of the female body (Guerra 65). In this way, Irigaray rejects the view of the masculine subject—and the male body—as the epistemological center of Western philosophy and provides women with an organic source of identification beyond that of the feminine other of logocentrism.

Within her feminine imaginary, Irigaray looks to the sexual organs of the female body as symbols of multiplicity, fluidity, and contiguity. As opposed to the traditional masculine economy, which idealizes the unity of the erect phallus and in which menstruation appears as a silenced menace, Irigaray’s feminine imaginary emphasizes the multiplicity and reciprocity that she sees denoted in the two rubbing lips of the vagina. In addition to the implied autoeroticism of this view of the female genitalia which frees women from a reliance on men for sexual satisfaction, Irigaray’s equation of the female genitalia with multiplicity supplants the concepts of unity, individuality, and hierarchy at the heart of traditional Western philosophy. In order to further the proliferation of this feminine imaginary, Irigaray envisions the creation of communities of women “que ciertamente se constituirá en los márgenes de la nación y que reemplazará . . . el poder (pouvoir) por el poderío (puissance), es decir, por esa
energía de lo femenino ancestral” (“that will surely be built on the margins of the nation and that will replace . . . power (pouvoir) for potency (puissance), that is to say, for the energy of the ancestral feminine”; Guerra 70; my translation). This community of women would, in turn, provide the space for the creation of a new symbolic environment in which matri-lineage could be reaffirmed. This new symbolic environment would also involve the creation of a new, fluid language—one that would not distinguish between subject and object and would valorize touch over sight.

The significance of Irigaray’s contribution to feminist philosophy is both wide and far reaching. To the extent that it reveals the bias towards the structure of the male body underlying all of traditional Western philosophy, Irigaray’s feminine imaginary represents a powerful critique. However, because Irigaray’s feminine imaginary is itself rooted in the biological structures of the female body, Irigaray’s work has also been criticized as essentialist—particularly by those who oppose any and all notions of ontology. On the other side of this argument, we find Judith Butler (1956-), who, in her seminal work Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990), argues for a view of gender as performance. Whereas Irigaray’s feminine imaginary envisions a female signifying economy existing outside of masculine discourse, in Gender Trouble Butler launches “a radical critique that seeks to free feminist theory from the necessity of having to construct a single or abiding ground which is invariably contested by those identity positions or anti-identity positions that it invariably excludes” (8). In other words, whereas Irigaray’s project is that of liberating feminist theory from the constraints of a masculine signifying economy, Butler’s project is that of relieving feminist theory of “women” as a problematic unitary subject position.
In the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire,” Butler draws on Foucault’s notion that “juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent” in order to read him as suggesting that “the category of sex, prior to any categorization of sexual difference is itself constructed through a historically specific mode of *sexuality*” which simultaneously “conceals . . . that very apparatus of production by postulating ‘sex’ as ‘a cause’ of sexual experience, behavior, and desire” (Butler 4, 31). *Sex*, as a binary that is socially and historically constructed, is then “a gendered category” masquerading as a prediscursive ontology that is in fact inseparable from *gender* itself (11). For Butler, unlike Irigaray, there is no possibility for a prediscursive female sexual economy because any and all forms of sexuality are always “culturally constructed within existing power relations” that are themselves defined by and coterminous with the signifying economy of masculine discourse (40). The term ‘women’ as the representational subject of feminism is itself a product of and, consequently, beneath the rubric of existing masculine discourse and power relations. However, because alternate genders and sexualities disrupt the purported internal coherence of gender identities, they have the ability to lay bare the “constructed status” of that coherence and to “inadvertently mobilize possibilities of ‘subjects’ that . . . effectively expand the boundaries of what is . . . culturally intelligible” (39). For Butler, the “feminist” answer is not to envision an alternate female signifying economy based on a presumably universal female ontology, but rather to ask: “what kind of subversive repetition” of alternate gender identities “might call into question the regulatory practices of identity itself?” (42).

This study uses Barbara Claire Freeman’s theory of the feminine sublime and Thomas Weiskel’s theory of the Romantic sublime, as well as the respective theories of Luce Irigaray
and Judith Butler, as a theoretical framework to explore the feminine sublime and its manifestations in *Uma aprendizagem ou O livro dos prazeres* (1969) by Clarice Lispector (1920-1977) and *La cresta de Ilión* (2002) by Cristina Rivera Garza (1964-). My analysis of Lispector’s *Uma aprendizagem* reveals the presence of the Romantic and feminine sublimes manifested in the protagonist’s journey of self-discovery, as well as in the novel’s elusive textual style, and it identifies the role of heterosexuality as a dominant paradigm in the text.

In my analysis of *La cresta de Ilión*, I demonstrate the way in which Rivera Garza re-visits the themes of self-discovery and the feminine sublime from within the context of contemporary gender theory and, by doing so, in effect transforms—or queers—this mainstay of feminist literature.

I have chosen to juxtapose these two works by women of different generations writing different languages in order to demonstrate some of the shifts and transformations, as well as the constants that define the presence of the sublime within the writing of Latin American women. In addition to the respective importance of both Clarice Lispector and Cristina Rivera Garza within the field Latin American literature, the similar imagery that Lispector and Rivera Garza use to represent the sublime in their works belies the different theoretical formulations underlying each of their conceptions of sublimity and thus provides an interesting and useful point of comparison. In my analysis of the feminine sublime in the novels of Lispector and Rivera Garza, I demonstrate the way in which these novelists’ respective formulations of the sublime have shifted in accordance with divergent theories of the traditional, feminine, and female sublimes, as well as with transformations within the field of feminist theory in general. Lispector and Rivera Garza also prove to be particularly appropriate to the study of sublime as a result of the way in which each of them can be seen
to participate in the method of what Rivera Garza calls *making strange*, or what Thomas Weiskel refers to as the metonymical sublime, and which Lispector and Rivera Garza might be seen to share with other Latin American women writers, such as María Luisa Bombal (1910-1980) and Alejandra Pizarnik (1936-1972).

While other critics have previously associated what I identify as the sublime with other philosophical concepts—for example, Lispector’s writing has been linked to Paul Brunton’s conception of grace and Charles Sanders Peirce’s theory of abduction—I have found that the theoretical concept of the sublime, due to both its longevity and its semiotic formulation by Thomas Weiskel, has unique contributions to make to our understanding of Latin American women authors writing in this particular textual style.

My approach to Clarice Lispector’s *Uma aprendizagem ou O livro dos prazeres* shows the way in which the protagonist’s journey of self-discovery, which she realizes through successive encounters with silence and sea, is largely tied to an experience of both the Romantic and feminine sublimes. The protagonist’s relationship with the sublime facilitates her estrangement from conventional reality and from her social identity, thereby enabling her to experience the sublimity of her own existence. As in Freeman’s analyses of the feminine sublime in *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction*, Lispector’s protagonist’s experience of the feminine sublime involves a rejection of rationality and intellectual knowledge. Although Lispector manifests this rejection of rationality through the collapsing of binaries, such as pain-pleasure and anger-compassion, the novel leaves the traditional male-female gender binary largely intact, to the point of inscribing a heterosexual paradigm onto the sublime itself. Therefore, while *Uma aprendizagem* effectively deconstructs many of the binaries surrounding conventional
formulations of the sublime, in the end the novel fails to deliver on the fuller connotations of irrationality and paradox implicit in the concept of sublimity.

My study of Cristina Rivera Garza’s La cresta de Ilión demonstrates the way in which this novel is both a return to, and also a reworking of, the feminine sublime found in Lispector’s Uma aprendizagem. Like Uma aprendizagem, Rivera Garza’s La cresta de Ilión is the story of a journey of self-discovery through which the protagonist enters into a relationship with the feminine sublime. As in Lispector’s novel, the protagonist’s experience of the feminine sublime is largely tied to its traditional manifestations within women’s fiction, namely writing and language, silence, and the sea. However, while Rivera Garza clearly links the protagonist’s experience of the feminine sublime to knowledge and experience gendered as female, she also simultaneously calls into question the ontological necessity of this linkage by, among other things, granting its access to a protagonist who is largely figured as male, but whose gender she ultimately leaves in question.

I will show that, while La cresta de Ilión is firmly rooted in Freeman’s conception of the feminine sublime, it is also interwoven with Butler’s theory of gender performance, as well as Yaeger’s & Battersby’s theories of the maternal sublime and focus on the materiality of the female body. The heterogeneity of Rivera Garza’s text thus produces a perplexing encounter between notions of gender performance as seen in the work of Judith Butler and notions of feminine ontology as seen in the writings of Luce Irigaray. Through this encounter, each of these two theoretical discursive systems is transformed into a literary entity that is neither entirely ontological nor entirely performative, but that oscillates in the tension that their meeting creates. By staging this encounter between ontological feminist tropes and the notion of performance underlying contemporary gender theory, Rivera Garza
offers us an increasingly complex formulation of the feminine sublime as a conceptual framework through which to consider questions of language and gender.

Through this examination of the sublime within the novels of Clarice Lispector and Cristina Rivera Garza, I make a case for the presence of the feminine and female sublimes within modern and contemporary Latin American fiction. By exploring the similar, yet also highly distinctive conceptions of the sublime that appear in these two novels, it becomes apparent that the sublime should occupy a position within the analysis of the writing of Lispector and Rivera Garza, and that, due to the diversity of its manifestations, the sublime also begs the need for more extensive study within the field of modern and contemporary Latin American literature in general. I begin this study by delineating the presence of the sublime in Clarice Lispector’s *Uma aprendizagem ou O livro dos prazeres*, demonstrating the way in which this novel can be seen to contain elements of both the Romantic and feminine sublimes.
Weiskel acknowledges that fusing the rhetorical and analytical [natural] sublimes has the potential to be reductive. However, he still finds it useful to do so in order to provide a semiotic theory of the sublime that will “restate the difficult dynamic problem” of why the sublime causes a “break down” in comprehension (25): “A general semiotic of the sublime would find, I think, the same discontinuity between sensation and idea as between idea and word—this is, at any rate, the substance of my hypothesis in fusing the natural and rhetorical sublimes” (17).

Weiskel offers William Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” as an example of this version of the sublime:

\[
\text{And I have felt} \\
\text{A presence that disturbs me with the joy} \\
\text{Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime} \\
\text{Of something far more deeply interfused} \\
\text{Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,} \\
\text{And the round ocean and the living air,} \\
\text{And the blue sky, and in the mind of man. . . .} \quad \text{(Wordsworth as qtd. in Weiskel 29)}
\]

Joanna Zylinska takes this designation of “feminine” one step further in On Spiders, Cyborgs, and Being Scared: the Feminine and the Sublime, in which she fully divorces the notion of the feminine sublime from its location in women’s fiction (Battersby 86; 99). Although Barbara Freeman downplays any essential correlation between her feminine sublime and female ontology, she also analyzes the sublime in texts written almost exclusively by women. Conversely, Zylinska takes little if any interest in the specificity of women’s artistic production.

Clarice Lispector is widely recognized for her pivotal place within the field of Latin American woman’s literature, as is evidenced, among other things, by the importance of her writing to the thinking of French philosopher Hélène Cixous. Cristina Rivera Garza stands out as a two-time winner of the prestigious Sor Juana Inés de Cruz literary award; she won in 2001 for her novel Nadie me verá llorar (No One Will See Me Cry) and again in 2009 for her novel La muerte me da (Death Hits).
CHAPTER 2

Existence as Infinite as the Ocean:
Clarice Lispector’s *Uma aprendizagem ou O livro dos prazeres*

Pois ela estava como na sua primeira infância e sem medo de que a angústia sobreviesse: estava em encantamento pelas cores orientais do Sol que desenhava figuras góticas nas sombras. Pois que o Deus foi nascido da Natureza e por sua vez Ele interferiu nela. As últimas claridades ondulavam as águas paradas e verdes da piscina. *Descobrindo o sublime no trivial, o invisível sob o tangível*—ela própria toda desarmada como se tivesse naquele momento sabido que sua capacidade de descobrir os segredos da vida natural ainda estivesse intacta. (73; my emphasis)

It was as if she were in the first stages of infancy, unafraid of the anguish that might result. She was enchanted by the exotic colors of the sun which created gothic figures in the shadows. For God was born of nature and, in turn, intervened in it. The last rays of light shimmered across the still, green waters of the pool. *Discovering the sublime in the trivial, the invisible beneath the tangible* . . . she herself was totally disarmed as if at that moment she had known that her ability to discover the secrets of life was still intact. (46; my emphasis)

In *Uma aprendizagem ou O livro dos prazeres* (*An Apprenticeship or The Book of Delights*), the protagonist, Lóri, embarks upon a voyage of spiritual self-discovery that she realizes through a series of encounters with the feminine sublime as represented by silence and sea. As I will demonstrate, the protagonist’s relationship with the feminine sublime facilitates her estrangement from conventional reality and from her social identity, thereby enabling her to experience the sublimity of her own existence.¹ As in Freeman’s analysis of the feminine sublime, Clarice Lispector’s protagonist’s experience of the feminine sublime involves a rejection of rationality and intellectual knowledge. Although Lispector manifests this rejection of rationality through the collapsing of binaries, such as pain-pleasure and
anger-compassion, in her portrayal of the central characters she confounds us by leaving the traditional male-female gender binary largely intact.

_Uma aprendizagem_ tells the story of the romantic and spiritual relationship that develops between Lóri, an upper-class woman, and Ulisses, a philosophy professor, in which he serves as her mentor. The text primarily consists of Lóri’s reflections and moments of insight, as well as of a series of encounters between Lóri and Ulisses that ultimately culminate in a physical relationship. As we will see, the novel’s lack of a clear plot-line makes it difficult to provide a more concrete summary of the text.

_Uma aprendizagem_ opens with a brief section entitled _A origem da primavera ou A morte necessária em pleno dia_ (The Beginning of Spring or A Necessary Death in Broad Daylight), in which an omniscient narrator recounts Lóri’s experience of existential crisis, involving a break from the material world, that represents her embarkment on her voyage of self-discovery. Lispector highlights the novel’s quest motif with the name of Lóri’s mentor, Ulisses, in a clear gesture to Homer’s _Odyssey_. However, as Patricia Zecevic indicates in her article on the novel, _Uma aprendizagem_ does not manifest the traditional voyage structure of an epic or _Bildungsroman_; instead the framework of Lispector’s novel is quintessentially postmodern —reminiscent of an Unamunian nivola due to the striking absence of a clear plot-line. As is evident from both the title of the novel and the title of the novel’s first section, in this text Lispector characteristically celebrates and plays with the paradox that governs all of life’s journeys, “in which progress is offset by repeated regressions and in which straightforward linear development is overcome by organic growth” (Zecevic 56). As philosophy professor Ulisses argues in the novel itself: “Essa desarticulação é necessária para que se veja aquilo que, se fosse articulado e harmonioso não seria visto, seria tomado como
óbvio” (“That confusion is necessary so that you can see what, if it were articulated and harmonious, you would not see and would consider obvious”; 105-6; Mazzara 67).

The progression that we do see in *Uma aprendizagem* concerns the process of spiritual growth, or apprenticeship, that Lóri realizes through her spiritual and romantic relationship with Ulisses, as well as her increasing awareness of and appreciation for the natural world. The driving force of the novel arises from the fact that the couple, under Ulisses’s direction, has resolved to abstain from sexual relations until Lóri has attained a higher level of emotional and spiritual maturity—until she is “mais pronta” (“more prepared”; 48; Mazzara 29). In the process of abstaining from sexual relations with Ulisses, which in the past she has used as an antidote for existential anxiety, Lóri develops a heightened state of self-awareness and discovers her own capacity for spiritual transcendence via communion with the natural world, finding that “sua capacidade de descobrir os segredos da vida natural ainda estivesse intacta” (“her ability to discover the secrets of life was still intact”; 73; Mazzara 46). Therefore, when she and Ulisses do finally consummate their relationship at the novel’s conclusion, Lóri has become fully individuated and has a much deeper understanding of who she is. However, from a feminist perspective, the fact that Lóri’s process of self-discovery is so intimately bound up with their romantic relationship and that Lóri embarks on this journey of self-exploration ostensibly to be with Ulisses appear as problematic—a point that I will revisit within my analysis of the text.

While critics such as Zecevic have outlined the quest motif within the novel and recognized that Lóri’s process of self-discovery involves a series of spiritual encounters with the natural world, they have not specifically identified these encounters as instantiations of the sublime. Upon closer analysis, however, these encounters manifest elements of both the
Romantic and the feminine sublime, as outlined by Weiskel and Freeman, respectively. In spite of Weiskel’s assertion that “we have long since been too ironic for the capacious gestures of the Romantic sublime” and that “infinite spaces are no longer astonishing; still less do they terrify” (6), in writing *Uma aprendizagem*, Lispector clearly draws upon the sublime as expressed by poets of the Romantic period, modifying its more antiquated characteristics to align with contemporary perspectives. As I demonstrate throughout this chapter, Lóri’s experience of inexpressible transcendence in her encounters with the infinite in the natural world—namely that of the ocean and of the silence in the mountains of Berne—is consistent with the sublime experience whose description is one of the cornerstones of Romanticism. It is this sublime that Lóri discovers in a moment of profound anxiety—*a morte necessária em pleno dia (a necessary death in broad daylight)—*in the opening section of the novel.

As Weiskel explains in *The Romantic Sublime*, the anxiety of the sublime encounter emerges from a lesser, more quotidian anxiety that is the anxiety of the modern condition. We see this modern anxiety clearly in the opening of *A origem da primavera ou A morte necessária em pleno dia*, which begins in mid sentence:

> estando tão ocupada, viera das compras de casa que a empregada fizera às pressas porque cada vez mais matava serviço, embora só viesse para deixar almoço e jantar prontos, dera vários telefonemas tomando providências, inclusive um difícil para chamar o bombeiro de encanamentos de água, fora à cozinha para arrumar as compras e dispor na fruteira as maçãs que eram a sua melhor comida, [. . .] viu o que a empregada deixara para jantar antes de ir embora, [. . .] enquanto notara que o terraço pequeno que era privilégio de seu apartamento por ser térreo precisava ser lavado [. . .] (9)

having been so busy, she had come from the shopping that the maid had done in a hurry because more and more she was becoming a sloppy worker, even though she came only to prepare lunch and dinner, and had taken advantage of the opportunity to make several phone calls, including a very difficult one to the plumber . . . then she had gone to the kitchen to put away the provisions and put the apples, her favorite food, in the fruit bowl, [. . .] she noticed what
the maid had left for dinner before going home and also noticed that her small
terrace, a special privilege for her apartment, needed to be washed . . .
(Mazzara 1)

Through this run-on enumeration of completed and pending tasks, Lispector communicates
the overwhelming superficiality characterizing Lóri’s existence. This superficiality is
reminiscent of Burke’s definition of boredom, his designation for a form of anxiety that grew
in concurrence with increased economic security during the eighteenth century and into the
Romantic period. As Weiskel explains, “Boredom masks uneasiness, and intense boredom
exhibits signs of the most basic of modern anxieties, the anxiety of nothingness, or absence”
(18). Lóri’s lifestyle is typical of the modern subject—or the upper-class modern
subject—who fills her time with chores and errands in order to avoid the profound absence
lurking beneath its surface.² It is from within the midst of this place of self-enforced
occupation—in the middle of deciding what to wear on her date with Ulisses—that Lóri
emerges into an awareness of the sublime.

perguntou-se se o vestido branco e preto serviria, [. . .] então do ventre
mesmo, como um estremecer longínquo de terra que mal se soubesse ser sinal
do terremoto, do útero, do coração contraído veio o tremor gigantesco duma
forte dor abalada, do corpo todo o abalo—e em sutis caretas de rostro e de
corpo afinal com a dificuldade de um petróleo rasgando a terra—veio afinal o
grande choro seco, [. . .] sacudida como a árvore forte que é mais
profundamente abalada que a árvore frágil —afinal rebentados canos e veias,
então (10)

she wondered if the black and white dress would do . . . [. . .] then from the
very pit of her stomach, like a distant tremor that might be the sign of an
earthquake for all she knew . . . from her womb, from her constricted heart
came the colossal tremor of a strong pain that jolted her whole body . . . and in
subtle grimaces in her face and body, finally and with difficulty, like a gusher
of oil ripping up through the earth . . . finally the dry, silent sobs came, [. . .]
leaving her shaken, like the strong tree that is more profoundly affected than
the fragile one . . . and constricting her very veins and blood vessels . . .
(Mazzara 2)
The inconclusive punctuation that opens and closes Lóri’s sublime encounter emphasizes the abruptness with which it erupts and, just as suddenly, fades away. In contrast to the anxiety of boredom manifested earlier, Lóri’s encounter with the sublime represents a profound existential anxiety that disrupts her focus on the material world and forces her to reconnect with a more profound and spiritual level of existence, in which, among other visions, she sees herself “deitada na palma transparente da mão de Deus” (“lying in the transparent palm of God’s hand”; 11; Mazzara 2). In Lóri’s encounter, we see that the sublime functions, as it does in Edmund Burke’s treatise, as “a kind of homeopathic therapy, a cure of uneasiness by means of the stronger, more concentrated—but momentary—anxiety involved in astonishment and terror” (Weiskel 18). Lóri herself understands her experience of the sublime analogically: in terms of a captive animal’s efforts to free itself from its bonds:

Agora lúcida e calma, Lóri lembrou-se de que lera que os movimentos histéricos de um animal preso tinham como intenção libertar, por meio de um desses movimentos, a coisa ignorada que o estava prendendo [. . .] durante o sábio descontrole de Lóri ela tivera para si mesma agora as vantagens libertadoras vindas de sua vida mais primitiva e animal: apelara histericamente para tantos sentimentos contraditórios e violentos que o sentimento libertador terminara desprendendo-a da rede [. . .]
estava cansada do esforço de animal libertado. (12)

Lucid and calm now, Lori remembered that she had read that the hysterical movements of a trapped animal were intended to free him by means of one of those movements of the unknown thing that held him [. . .] during Lori’s conscious lack of control she had had the liberating advantages coming from her most primitive animal existence: she had appealed hysterically to so many violent and contradictory feelings that her desire for freedom had finally disentangled her from the net [. . .]
she was tired with the effort of a freed animal (Mazzara 3)

This analogy echoes Burke’s view of the sublime as homeopathic cure, in that the lesser anxiety, or uneasiness, of modern society can be seen as a kind of captivity from which Lóri is freed via her apprehension of the sublime, which gives her access to a more natural state—to “sua vida mais primitiva e animal” (“her most primitive animal existence”; 12; Mazzara
3). At the same time, like the captive animal, for whom “a ignorância do movimento único, exato e libertador era o que tornava um animal histérico” (“his ignorance of the one, exact movement that would free him was what made the animal hysterical”; 12; Mazzara 3), Lóri is at a loss as to how to describe what she has experienced:

Lembrou-se de escrever a Ulisses contando o que se passara, mas nada se passara dizível em palavras escritas ou faladas, era bom aquele sistema que Ulisses inventara: o que não soubesse ou não pudesse dizer, escreveria e lhe daria o papel mudamente—mas dessa vez não havia sequer o que contar. (11)

She remembered to write to Ulysses to tell him what had happened . . . but nothing had happened that could be said in words written or spoken . . . that system that Ulysses had invented was a good one; whatever she did not know how to or could not say, she would write down and then silently give him the piece of paper . . . but this time there was nothing to tell. (Mazzara 3)

True to the economy of the sublime, Lóri’s experience defies description in either spoken or written discourse; in spite of—or perhaps precisely because of—the profundity of her experience, Lóri finds that she is left with nothing to tell. Just as Lóri’s cry has been a “choro mudo sem som algum até para ela mesma” (“silent [sob] [ . . . ], inaudible even to her”; 10; Mazzara 2), so, too, her experience of the sublime remains mute or voiceless—beyond the possibility of expression to anyone but herself.

In Lóri’s encounter, the astonishment and terror of the sublime moment give way to a series of evocative, paradoxical images:

sentou-se para descansar e em breve fazia de conta que ela era uma mulher azul porque o crepúsculo mais tarde talvez fosse azul, faz de conta que fiava com fios de ouro as sensações, faz de conta que a infância era hoje e prateada de brinquedos, faz de conta que uma veia não se abrira e faz de conta que dela não estava em silêncio alvíssimo escorrendo sangue escarlate, e que ela não estivesse pálida de morte mas isso fazia de conta que estava mesmo de verdade [ . . . ] (10)

then she sat down to rest and after a short time she pretended that she was blue because twilight might be blue . . . she pretended that she was spinning out golden threads around her emotions . . . she pretended that she was reliving
This series of continuous, and at times contradictory images is representative of the metonymical—or poet’s—sublime that Weiskel delineates as one of the two possible forms of the Romantic sublime, in which discourse is disrupted by an excess of the signified and from which “the mind recovers by displacing its excess of signified into a dimension of contiguity” (29). In the case of the metonymical sublime, meaning exceeds its capacity for expression, as “the word dissolves into the Word” (27). In the absence of an appropriate signifier, the mind risks becoming overwhelmed by the excess of meaning that subsumes it, “(threatening) . . . stasis, a kind of death by plenitude” (27). The only means of averting such stasis is to redistribute this excess of meaning onto whatever signifiers present themselves; “as if warned, the mind begins to ‘spread its thoughts,’ to avert the lingering which could deepen into an obsessive fixation” (29). The result is most often what Weiskel refers to as “elision,” which is precisely the kind of continuous imagery that we find in Lóri’s vision:

faz de conta que ela era sábia bastante para desfazer os nós de corda de marinheiro que lhe atavam os pulsos, faz de conta que tinha um cesto de pérolas só para olhar a cor da lua pois ela era lunar, faz de conta que ela fechasse os olhos e seres humanos surgissem quando abrisse os olhos úmidos de gratidão, faz de conta que tudo o que tinha não era faz de conta [. . .] (11)

she pretended that she was smart enough to undo the sailor’s knot that bound her wrists . . . she pretended that she had a basketful of pearls just so that she could gaze at the color of the moon, for she was like Diana . . . she pretended that if she were to close her eyes, her loved ones would appear before her and that when she opened her eyes, they would be moist with gratitude . . . she pretended that all this was not just her imagination [. . .] (Mazzara 2-3)

As Weiskel emphasizes in his analysis, “the text we have is a recovered speech, a discourse resumed after the silent break . . . which defines its value” (31). In keeping with Weiskel’s analysis of the poet’s sublime, Lóri’s visions represent an attempt to both express

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and contain the overwhelming significance, “o grande choro seco” (“the dry, silent [sob]”),
that she had experienced in the previous moment, and, as such, the meaning that these visions
carry emerges from the existential anxiety that precedes them (10; Mazzara 2). At the same
time, Lóri’s visions conform to the third phase of the sublime as delineated by Kant, in which
the subject “recovers the discourse by righting the balance” between signifier and signified
(Weiskel 27). In this third, or reactive phase of the sublime moment, Lóri’s flood of luminary
visions represent an attempt to displace the surplus of meaning experienced in the sublime
moment onto comprehensible signifying images, and thus reassert her position as a rational
subject and restore linguistic order, defined by a clear correspondence between sign and
meaning. Thus, it is possible to interpret the sublime that we find here as closer to the
Romantic sublime than the feminine sublime outlined by Freeman.

At the same time, we also find moments in the text that are more clearly
representative of the metaphorical—or hermeneutical/reader’s—sublime. The open-ended
questions that Lispector includes as part of Lóri’s description of the silence of a night in the
mountains of Berne, Switzerland cast doubt upon the reliability of Lóri utterances, producing
the kind of perplexity that Weiskel identifies as the defining characteristic of the
metaphorical sublime. Lóri writes of the silence: “Inútil querer povoá-lo com a possibilidade
de uma porta que se abra rangendo, de uma cortina que se abra e ‘diga’ alguma coisa. Ele é
vazio e sem promessa. Como eu, Ulisses?” (“It’s useless to try to break it by thinking of
someone opening a creaking door, of someone stepping through a curtain and saying
something. It’s empty and offers no promise. Like me, Ulysses?”; 34; Mazzara 19). Later in
the same passage we find a similar non-assertion: “Surgem as justificações, trágicas,
justificações forjadas, humildes desculpas até à indignidade . . . Até que se descobre,
Ulisses—nem a tua indignidade ele quer. Ele é o Silêncio. Ele é o Deus?” (“Tragic justifications arise, forced justifications, excuses, humble to the point of being unworthy . . .
Until you discover, Ulysses, that it doesn’t want even your unworthiness. It is silence. Is it God?”; 35; Mazzara 20). These non-assertions in the form of open-ended questions bespeak Lispector’s characteristic questioning of the ability of language to effectively communicate or to convey human experience.3 Thus, although this technique is not as developed in *Uma aprendizagem* as it is in many of her other works, Lispector’s quintessential use of questions to throw the meaning of language into doubt enables us to recognize the presence of the metaphorical sublime, as well as the metonymical sublime, in this text.

Returning to the novel’s opening section, in the narrator’s description of “o grande choro seco” (“the dry, silent [sob]”; 10; Mazzara 2), we recognize the natural imagery that has come to be seen as the quintessential marker of the Romantic sublime. Here the narrator compares Lóri’s emotional break to “um estremecer longínquo de terra” (“a distant tremor”), as well as to “um petróleo rasgando a terra” (“a gusher of oil ripping up through the earth”) and “[o sacudir de uma] árvore forte” (“[the shaking of a] strong tree”; 10; Mazzara 2). An even clearer example of the natural imagery characteristic of the Romantic sublime appears in Lóri’s attempt to convey the silence of a night in the mountains of Berne to Ulisses. Lóri links this instance of the sublime to its traditional manifestations: the silence she describes occurs within mountains “tão altas que o desespero tem pudor” (“so tall that desperation becomes awe””; 33; Mazzara 19), and its all encompassing presence resembles that of the sea: “Que se espere o resto da escuridão diante do silêncio, só os pés molhados pela espuma de algo que se espraia de dentro de nós” (“He should wait before silence for the rest of darkness, with only his feet wet from the foam of something that spurts from within””; 36;
Mazzara 21). Like the Romantic sublime, the silence of the mountains represents a space of unavoidable spatial and temporal rupture; as Lóri explains to Ulisses:

‘One tries in vain to read so as not to hear it, to think quickly so as to disguise it, to devise a plan that will serve as a fragile link to the suddenly improbable day to come. [. . .] A person can try to throw it off track, too. For example, he can drop the book from his nightstand as if by accident. But—oh my!—the book drops down into silence and is lost in its silent, still abyss.’ (Mazzara 19-20; my emphasis)

In addition, as in Lockean/associationist psychology, which understands immense natural phenomena as having the ability to reflect the vastness of the human soul, in this passage, the silence of the mountains appears as the reflection of a person’s soul, or inner self: “Então ele, o silêncio, aparece. E o coração bate ao reconhecer-lo: pois ele é o de dentro da gente” (“‘Then silence appears. And the heart beats faster in recognition, for it comes from within’”; 35; Mazzara 20).

It is in this sublime encounter that we first begin to see intimations of the feminine sublime as analyzed by Barbara Claire Freeman as a site of voluntary “dispossession” or “self-dispersal” (Freeman 19). In her letter to Ulisses, Lóri declares that the correct approach to the sublime experience is to enter into it directly: “Então, se há coragem, não se luta mais. [. . .] Vai-se com ele, nós os únicos fantasmas de uma noite em Berna” (“‘Then, if a person has courage, he doesn’t fight any more. [. . .] He goes along with it. We, the last ghosts of a night in Berne, go along with it’”; 36; Mazzara 20). Although Lóri’s attempts to resist the silence retain some of the struggle characteristic of the Romantic sublime, her assertion that “se há coragem [. . .] Entra-se nele [. . .] Vai-se com ele” (“‘if a person has courage [. . .] [He
enters it” [. . .] He goes along with it’’; 36; Mazzara 20), reveals her approach to the sublime to be primarily one of immersion rather than one of conflict or struggle. Like Edna’s final swim in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, which Freeman includes in her analysis of the feminine sublime, Lóri’s approach to the silence of the mountains “does not represent a struggle for dominance over a force that…has the power to engulf her, but rather…allows a relation to ‘the unlimited’ in which she seeks ‘to lose herself’” (Freeman 31). As Lóri explains, entering into the silence is an act of willful immersion: “Será como se estivéssemos num navio tão descomunalmente enorme que ignorássemos estar num navio. E este singrasse tão largamente que ignorássemos estar indo. [. . .] Quando [o coração] se apresenta todo nu, nem é comunicação, é *submissão*” (“‘It would be as though we were in such an unusually large boat that we would never know we were in a boat. And it would sail so smoothly that we would never know we were moving. [. . .] When the heart is laid completely bare, it is not communication but *submission*’”; 36; Mazzara 20-1; my emphasis). Also in keeping with Freeman’s analysis of the feminine sublime is the fact that this act of self-dispersal is an empowering and agential undertaking; the fact that one only chooses to enter into the silence “se há coragem” (“‘if a person has courage’”) indicates that Lóri’s submission represents an act of empowerment, rather than one of cowardice or fear (36; Mazzara 20).

Another component of the feminine sublime that we find in *Uma aprendizagem* is Lóri’s celebration of irrationality. Viewing the rejection of rational thought as a key component of the sublime would seem to follow naturally from a concept whose function, according to Weiskel, is “to legitimate the necessary discontinuities in the classical scheme of signification and to justify the specific affective experience which these discontinuities [entail]” (17). In the history of the theoretical discourse of the sublime, however, more
emphasis has been placed on the concept of the sublime turn, or the reactive phase of the sublime moment in which “the mind recovers the balance of outer and inner by constituting a fresh relation between itself and the object such that the very indeterminacy which erupted in phase two is taken as symbolizing the mind’s relation to a transcendent order” (Weiskel 24). In other words, the sublime has more often been used, or co-opted, to support the supremacy of rationality, rather than the irrationality by which it is itself defined. In the case of the feminine sublime, however, there is no phase three in which the mind recuperates its rational dominion over irrationality; there is no sublime turn. Instead, the feminine sublime represents an experience of irrationality that the subject “bear(s) witness (to) without attempting to contain” (26). We see this aspect of the feminine sublime in Lóri’s celebration of irrationality in her account of being lost one evening in Paris. In this passage, Lóri links irrationality to the concept of the sublime by describing it as vast and limitless, like the silence of the mountains in Berne. She refers to irrationality as “não entender” (“not understanding”): “‘Não entender’ era tão vasto que ultrapassava qualquer entender—entender era sempre limitado. Mas não-entender não tinha fronteiras e levava ao infinito, ao Deus” (“‘Not understanding’ was a concept so vast that it surpassed any understanding, which was always so limited. But not understanding did not have any boundaries and led to the infinite, to God”; 42; Mazzara 25). Unlike earlier theorists of the sublime, for whom the excess of the sublime moment is merely a means to an even greater assertion of rationality, for Lóri “compreender era sempre um erro” (“understanding was always a mistake”); she prefers “a largueza tão ampla e livre e sem erros que era não-entender” (“the broad, free and errorless margin that was not understanding”; 43; Mazzara 25). Just as Lóri’s approach to the sublime does not consist of a struggle for dominance, her
approach to irrationality is to appreciate rather than overcome it. If she at times wishes to
attain greater understanding of the sublime experience, it is only in order to “ter mais
consciência” (“be more aware”) of what she does not understand (43; Mazzara 25).

For Lóri, irrationality constitutes the essence of the human condition, as well as the
essence of God. Regarding the former, Lóri observes that not understanding “era ruim, mas
pelo menos se sabia que se estava em plena condição humana” (“was bad, but at least one
knew that one was completely human”; 43; Mazzara 25). In spite of the discomfort that her
lack of understanding causes her, Lóri recognizes irrationality, and by extension sublimity, to
be closer to the essence of the human condition than understanding, or rationality.

Analogizing her experience of being lost in Paris to an experience of being outside of reality,
Lóri observes that “estar perdida não era a verdade corriqueira mas era a irrealidade que lhe
vinha dar a noção de sua condição verdadeira. E a de todos” (“She was not actually lost, but
the strangeness of the situation led her to realize the true nature of her condition. And
everyone else’s”; 45; Mazzara 27). Similarly, during the course of her apprenticeship, Lóri
comes to the conclusion that “o verdadeiro Deus, não feito à sua imagem e semelhança, era
por isso totalmente incompreendido por ela” (“the real God, not made in her [image and
likeness], was thus totally incomprehensible to her”; 67; Mazzara 42; my translation). Lóri’s
new conception of God is as an entity that exceeds comprehension, or as the sublime: “De
agora em diante, se quisesse rezar, seria como rezar às cegas ao cosmos e ao Nada” (“From
now on if she wanted to pray, it would be like praying blindly to the cosmos and to
Nothingness”; 67; Mazzara 42). Lóri’s association of this newfound, impersonal God with
sublimity also appears in the fact that she equates his word, as well as God himself, with
silence: “a palavra de Deus era de tal mudez completa que aquele silêncio era Ele próprio”
(“the word of God was so completely silent that He and that silence were one and the same”; 67; Mazzara 42). As was true of her approach to the sublime silence of the mountains of Berne, Lóri desperately longs to merge with this God: “ansiava por essa integração sem palavras” (“she longed for that wordless communication”; 66; Mazzara 42), whom she alternately figures as God, as nature, or as the world itself. As she informs Ulisses, “—Um dia será o mundo com sua impersonalidade soberba versus a minha extrema individualidade de pessoa mas seremos um só” (“Some day the supremely impersonal world will be opposed to my extreme individuality as a person, but we will be one”; 76; Mazzara 47).

Lispector links Lóri’s experience of the sublime within silence and irrationality to the budding romance between Lóri and Ulisses—representing a critical moment in their courtship as also a critical moment in their individual voyages of self-discovery: “um grande passo dado na aprendizagem” (“a big step forward in their apprenticeship”; 75; Mazzara 47). This passage occurs during “o silêncio do entardecer” (“the silence of late afternoon”) when Lóri’s vision shifts to allow her to recognize Ulisses as a handsome man, which, in turn, makes her aware of the sublimity of her own existence (71; Mazzara 45). The shift occurs as follows:

Olhou para as mesinhas com pára-sol dispostas em torno da piscina: pareciam sobrepairar na homogeneidade do cosmo. Tudo era infinito, nada tinha começo nem fim: assim era a eternidade cósmica. Daí a um instante a visão da realidade se desfazia, fora apenas um átimo de segundo, a homogeneidade desaparecia e os olhos se perdiam numa multiplicidade de tonalidades ainda surpreendentes: à visão aguda e instantânea seguir-se algo mais reconhecível na terra. Quanto a Ulisses [...]

Pela primeira vez [...] olhou-o sob o ponto de vista de beleza estritamente masculina, e viu que havia nele uma calma virilidade. Sob a nova luz, Ulisses estava irreal e no entanto verossímil. Irreal pela sua espécie de beleza, que agora flutuava com as flutuações últimas do sol. Verossímil porque bastaria estender a mão e, no que estes o tocasse, encontraria a resistência do que é sólido. (71-2)
She looked at the umbrella tables arranged around the pool: they appeared to soar high in the uniform cosmos. Everything was infinite with no beginning or end in the eternal cosmos. In an instant the vision of reality began to disappear. It lasted only a fraction of a second. The uniformity was disappearing and her eyes became confused in a multiplicity of even more surprising shades. The sharp, clear vision was followed by something more recognizable on earth. As for Ulysses [. . .]

[. . .] for the first time she looked at him from the point of view of strictly masculine beauty, and she saw that there was a quiet virility in him. In the new light, Ulysses was unreal and yet appeared to be real. He was unreal because of his type of beauty, which now fluctuated in the rays of the setting sun. He appeared to be real because all she had to do was extend her hand and as soon as she touched him it would meet the resistance of something solid.

(Mazzara 45)

Lóri understands her appreciation of Ulisses’s evanescent, otherworldly beauty as a significant rite of passage in her apprenticeship of the sublime, finding that “aquilo que ela julgara ser apenas o seu olhar direto para Ulisses e para a realidade dele fora o primeiro passo assustador para alguma coisa” (“what she had supposed was only her close look at Ulysses and at [his] reality had been her first frightening step toward something”; 73; Mazzara 46). It is here that we find the only actual mention of the sublime that occurs in the novel and which I have quoted above: “Pois ela estava como na sua primeira infância e sem medo de que a angústia sobreviesse [. . .] Descobrindo o sublime no trivial, o invisível sob o tangível —ela própria toda desarmada como se tivesse naquele momento sabido que sua capacidade de descobrir os segredos da vida natural ainda estivesse intacta” (“It was as if she were in the first stages of infancy, unafraid of the anguish that might result [. . .] Discovering the sublime in the trivial, the invisible beneath the tangible . . . she herself was totally disarmed as if at that moment she had known that her ability to discover the secrets of life was still intact”; 73; Mazzara 46; my emphasis). It is in this moment that Lóri realizes that she still possesses the capacity to access the sublime, not only via intense anxiety or profound silence, but also through the seemingly mundane occurrences of everyday life, in a truly Wordworthian
approach to sublimity. It is here, when Ulisses asks Lóri why she has been looking at people so closely, that Lóri recognizes the sublimity of her own existence and leads Ulisses to recognize his as well:

— [. . .] Por que é que você olha tão demoradamente cada pessoa?
Ela corou:
— [. . .] é que eu gosto de ver as pessoas sendo.
Então estranhou-se a si própria e isso parecia levá-la a uma vertigem. [. . .]
disse-lhe bem baixo:
— Estou sendo. . .

[. . .] Ele examinou-a e por um momento estranhou-a, aquele rosto familiar de mulher. Ele se estranhou, e entendeu Lóri: ele estava sendo.
Ficaram calados como se os dois pela primeira vez tivessem encontrado. Estavam sendo. (74-5)

“Why do you stare so at everybody?”
She blushed. “[. . .] it’s because I like to watch people existing.”
Then she surprised herself and that seemed to make her dizzy. [. . .] she said very softly, “I’m existing . . .”

[. . .] He looked at her carefully and for a moment [did not recognize the] familiar woman’s face. He was surprised and then he understood Lori: he was existing.
They remained silent as if the two of them had just met for the first time. They were existing. (Mazzara 46-7)

As Lóri and Ulisses enter into this state of pure nature, or being, the division of familiar social constructs such as gender cease to have any relevance for them. Instead of abiding separately as a man and a woman, in this moment, Lóri and Ulisses become two nondescript living entities united in a common awareness of their own existence. As with her previous experiences of the sublime, Lóri equates the sublimity of her existence that she experiences here with the vastness of the ocean: “E não havia perigo de gastar este sentimento com medo de perdê-lo, porque ser era infinito, de um infinito de ondas do mar” (“And there was no danger of exhausting this feeling or fear of losing it because being was infinite, as infinite as the waves in the ocean”; 75; Mazzara 47; my emphasis). Moreover, as with earlier experiences of the sublime, it is its complete irrationality that enables her to trust in the truth,
or “reality,” of her experience: “Tudo aquilo era absolutamente impossível, por isso é que Lóri sabia que via. Se fosse o razoável, ela de nada saberia” (“All that was absolutely impossible and for that reason Lori knew that she was seeing it. If it had been possible, she would have noticed none of it”; 75; Mazzara 47). Here again, Lóri resolutely demonstrates her belief that “é só quando esquecemos todos os nossos conhecimentos é que começamos a saber” (“it’s only when we forget everything we’ve learned that we begin to know”; 53; Mazzara 32).7

This theme of sublime irrationality as a means to greater spiritual awareness also appears in Lispector’s collapsing of binaries to form moments of paradox. As Freeman argues of Kate Chopin’s The Awakening, in Uma aprendizagem Lispector “consistently refuses a dualistic formulation of the relation between life and death, sleeping and waking, or pleasure and pain, and in doing so . . . (displaces) the notion that the sublime attests to a polarization of opposites” (27). Instead, Uma aprendizagem is populated by moments in which Lóri experiences great pleasure in the midst of, and as a result of, great pain, and vice versa, suggesting the “co-implication” of perceived binaries and, thus, the decomposition of the dualism underlying rational thought (Freeman 27). One of these moments occurs immediately following, and in response to, Lóri’s realization of the sublimity of existence, which both delights and scares her: “Lóri estava suavemente espantada. Então isso era a felicidade” (“Lori was mildly frightened. So this was happiness”; 76; Mazzara 48). Lóri is unsure what to make of her newfound felicity, which she finds both pacifying and painful, and, ultimately, too intense: “Que faço dessa paz estranha e aguda, que já está começando a me doer como uma angústia, como um grande silêncio de espaços? A quem dou minha felicidade, que já está começando a me rasgar um pouco e me assusta. Não, não quero ser
feliz. Prefiro a mediocridade” (“What am I to do with this strange, keen sense of peace that is already beginning to hurt me like anguish, like the great silence of space? To whom shall I give my happiness which is already beginning to tear me apart and which frightens me? No, I don’t want to be happy. I prefer being ordinary”; 76-77; Mazzara 48). In this instance, Lóri rejects the pain of happiness, but she returns to it again and again, ultimately learning to live, like Ulisses, “apesar de” (“no matter what”; 23; Mazzara 11): to withstand intense emotional pain so that she will be able to experience intense pleasure.

Lóri experiences a similar paradox in relation to the binary between joy and rage. In a passage in which Lóri becomes angry with God at the possibility that she might never see Ulisses again and be stripped of all the progress she has made, she is at the same time joyful at her ability to experience such intensity of emotion: “A força de destruição ainda se continha e ela não entendia por que vibrava de alegria de ser capaz de tal ira. É que estava vivendo. E não havia perigo de realmente destruir ninguém ou nada porque a piedade era nela tão forte quanto a ira” (“The destructive force remained in check, and she did not understand why she vibrated with the joy of being capable of such anger. It was because she was alive. And there was no danger of actually destroying anything because compassion was as strong in her as anger”; 123; Mazzara 80). Lóri recognizes coexisting within herself equal forces of joy and rage, compassion and anger, and, like the sublime moment she experiences at the pool with Ulisses, she identifies that conglomeration of forces as what it means to be alive. She understands that it is in allowing oneself to feel the heterogeneity of emotion, in all its vibrant complexity, that one is saved from the vacuity—“the anxiety of nothingness, or absence”—at the root of the modern condition (Weiskel 18): “Sabia que por enquanto doía muito e que depois ainda doeria mais [. . .] E talvez viesse a se salvar: porque a angústia era a
incapacidade de enfim sentir a dor” (“She knew that in the meantime she was in great pain and that afterward she would be in greater pain [. . .] And perhaps she would come to save herself because anguish, after all, was the inability to feel pain”; 68; Mazzara 43).

Like the works by Sappho and Kate Chopin that Freeman analyzes in *The Feminine Sublime*, Lispector’s *Uma aprendizagem* is a novel that “resists and critiques” a theorization of sublimity that “[depends] for its construction on the repression of excess” (Freeman 22, 25). Given that a significant component of this critique lies in Lispector’s assertion of irrationality through the collapsing of binaries, it is interesting that, with the exception of the moment by the pool when they enter into a state of pure being, the novel leaves the traditional gender binary between Lóri and Ulisses intact. The dating roles that each of them inhabits are highly traditional in all respects except that it is Ulisses who suggests that they should wait to sleep together. Lóri and Ulisses become romantically involved because Ulisses notices Lóri on the street one day and approaches her, and Lóri herself is involved in the usual game of seduction, followed by playing hard to get. The scene that most clearly encapsulates the gender roles that each of them occupies occurs in the Floresta da Tijuca, a restaurant where they have gone for dinner. After having eaten, they are sitting by the fireplace and Ulisses is fanning the flames:

Ele, *o homem*, se ocupava atiçando o fogo. Ela nem se lembrava de fazer o mesmo: não era o seu papel, pois tinha o seu homem para isso. Não sendo donzela, que o homem então cumprisse a sua missão.
O mais que fazia foi uma ou duas vezes instigá-lo:
— Olhe aquela acha, ela ainda não pegou . .
E ele, antes de ela acabar a frase, por si próprio já notara a acha apagada, homem seu que ele era, e já estava atiçando-a com o ferro. Não a comando seu que era mulher de um homem e que perderia o seu estado se lhe desse uma ordem. (113-4; my emphasis)

Because he was *a man*, he busied himself with stoking the fire. She could not remember ever doing that. It was not her role because she had her man to
do that. As she was no longer a virgin it was fitting that the man accomplish
his mission.

The most that she did was encourage him a couple of times. “Look at that
log. It isn’t burning yet . . .”

And before she could finish the sentence he had already noticed the
smoldering log by himself, because he was her man, and was stoking it with
the poker. It was not an order on her part, for she had a man now and she
would lose her status if she gave him an order. (Mazzara 73; my emphasis)

In this scene, it is Lóri’s feminine passivity that enables Ulisses to fulfill his role as “homem
seu” (“her man”; 114; Mazzara 73). Similarly, it is essential to Lóri’s status as his woman
that she not direct or guide him in any way. Ulisses’s masculine virility allows him to
intercept any thoughts or observations that Lóri might have, such that her guidance serves as
mere encouragement to him in his role as solo actor.

Similarly, in their respective journeys of self-discovery Ulisses and Lóri take on the
conventional gender roles of male teacher—female student, or male leader—female
subservient. While, for the purposes of the novel, the details of her journey take precedence
over that of his, Lóri only chooses to embark on her journey at coaxing from Ulisses, who
refuses to sleep with her until he believes that she is “mais pronta” (“more prepared”; 48;
Mazzara 29). Even though this journey, in which Lóri develops an intimate relationship with
the natural world, eventually allows her to become a more fully developed human being, the
fact that the inception and direction of this process is initiated by a male philosophy professor
serves to reinstate, rather than undermine, traditional gender roles. Also, in spite of his
encouragement for her, Ulisses takes pride in the fact that he is farther along in his own
personal journey than Lóri is in hers: “ele estava infinitamente mais adiantado na
aprendizagem: ele reconhecia em si a alegria e a vitória” (“he was infinitely more advanced
in his apprenticeship, he was aware of his happiness and triumph”; 98; Mazzara 63), which
enables him to adopt the didactic tone that he uses in his conversations with Lóri throughout
the novel, and which Lóri herself comes to accept as only natural. Although Lóri occasionally surprises Ulisses with her insights, it is as a prize pupil would surprise her teacher with the speed and agility of her learning; while Ulisses is an apprentice of life, Lóri is both an apprentice of life, and of Ulisses.

The traditional gender binary that we see in both the sexual and the spiritual relationship between Ulisses and Lóri remains intact through the novel’s conclusion. Although critics have alternately attempted to read Uma aprendizagem as a parody (Andrade 47-54), and as a poststructuralist text in which language itself is the novel’s subject (Fitz 143), there is no clear textual evidence for either of these interpretations. On the contrary, Lispector’s optimistic depiction of the predominately conventional heterosexual relationship that occurs between Lóri and Ulisses is quite sincere. For example, in his Sexuality and Being in the Poststructuralist Universe of Clarice Lispector, Earl E. Fitz argues that “Lóri’s ‘final’ transformation [sweeps] her into a state of freedom that . . . transports her beyond even that of the perhaps well-intended but still trapped Ulisses” who is imprisoned by his reliance on masculine discourse (146). Fitz points to Lóri’s silence at Ulisses’s mention of marriage as proof of “the self-affirming flow of her burgeoning female language already carrying her . . . down a different, more revolutionary path” (146). What Fitz fails to acknowledge is that both Ulisses and Lóri occupy the silence that follows Ulisses’s mention of marriage: “Ficaram em silêncio tão prolongado que por um instante [ . . . ] ela não soube onde se achava” (‘They fell into such a long silence that for a moment [ . . . ] she did not know where she was’; 173; Mazzara 115). The silence that Fitz reads as evidence of Lóri’s solo feminine liberation is more clearly a sign of the couple’s mutual response to the gravity of the moment.
Even more telling is Lóri’s overall positive response to Ulisses’s sexual attentions, which would seem to indicate that, within this text, the conventional act of heterosexual intercourse does function as a kind of answer, or culminating response, to Lóri’s voyage of self-discovery. Unlike her short story “A mensagem” (“The Message”), in which the male and female protagonists’ mutual alienation occurs as a direct result of growing into their socially-determined gender roles, in *Uma aprendizagem*, these same gender roles are celebrated, along with the heterosexual model that underlies them. Fitz himself acknowledges that *Uma aprendizagem* “paints a potentially more optimistic picture of heterosexual experience” and that, in *Uma aprendizagem*, “the essentially poststructural malaise of Lispector’s universe . . . is offset by the text’s open avowal of the positive, potentially liberating power of human sexuality and of language” (78). We find such an “open avowal” of the relationship between Lóri and Ulisses in Lóri’s proclamations following the couple’s love-making: “Você me transformou na mulher que sou” (“You have transformed me into the woman that I am”) and “meu caminho chegou ao fim: quer dizer que cheguei à porta de um começo” (“my search has come to an end. What I mean is I’ve come to the edge of a new beginning”), as well as the realization that “ela havia atingido o impossível de si mesma” (“she had reached the impossible in herself”; 170, 174-5; Mazzara 113, 116). It is ironic that, although *Uma aprendizagem* is one of very few works by Lispector in which heterosexuality is painted as a viable social and sexual model (Fitz 142), because the text focuses almost exclusively on the relationship between Lóri and Ulisses, in *Uma aprendizagem*, heterosexuality appears as the only viable model. As Ulisses tells Lóri on one of their many outings, “Nunca se inventou nada além de morrer. Como nunca se inventou um modo diferente de amor de corpo [ . . . ]” (“No one has ever invented anything
beyond death. Just as no one has ever invented a different way of making love [. . .]”; 63; Mazzara 38).

If we pursue this point further, we find that, in *Uma aprendizagem*, the couple’s experience of sublimity as lived through their romantic relationship is intimately bound up with, and perhaps even dependent upon, their heterosexuality. The primacy of heterosexuality to the sublime experience appears not only in the relationship between Ulisses and Lóri, however. In *Uma aprendizagem*, Lóri’s encounter with the ocean, one of the key symbols of the sublime, is figured as an act of heterosexual intercourse, with Lóri as woman and the ocean as her male counterpart that “deixam-na por uns instantes cega, toda escorrendo—espantada de pé, fertilizada” (“leaves her blinded for a few moments, dripping with water, standing frightened and impregnated”; 84; Mazzara 53). 9 Lispector emphasizes the undeniable link between the sea and the discourse of the sublime by describing it as “o mar, a mais ininteligível das existências não humanas” (“the most enigmatic of all nonhuman entities”; 82; Mazzara 52), and by gesturing to Kant’s mathematical sublime in the following passage: 10

Lóri olhava o mar, era o que podia fazer. Ele só lhe era delimitado pela linha do horizonte, isto é, pela sua incapacidade humana de ver a curvatura da Terra [. . .]

Seu corpo se consola de sua própria exigüidade em relação à vastidão do mar porque é a exigüidade do corpo que o permite tornar-se quente e delimitado, e o que a tornava pobre e livre gente, com sua parte de libertade de cão nas areias. (82-3)

Lori looked at the sea. It was the only thing that she could do. Her view was limited only by the edge of the horizon, that is, by her human inability to see the Earth’s roundness [. . .]

Her body is comforted by its own smallness compared to the vastness of the sea, for it is the body’s smallness that makes it possible to have that warmth and definition and that made her a humble, free person with her share of the dog’s freedom on the sand. (Mazzara 52)
Having established the link between Lóri’s encounter with the ocean and the Kantian sublime, Lispector then develops a connection between the experience of sublimity and that of sexuality. Lóri’s swim in the ocean, in which “a garganta alimentada se constringe pelo sal” (“her nourished throat is constricted by the salt”) and “as ondas lhe batem e voltam, lhe batem e voltam” (“the waves crash against her and recede, crash against her and recede”; 84; Mazzara 53-4), clearly mirrors an act of heterosexual intercourse, particularly when the narrator states that “era isso o que estava lhe faltando: o mar por dentro como o líquido espesso de um homem” (“that was what she had been needing: the sea inside her like the thick liquid of a man”) and that Lóri “é a amante que não teme pois que sabe que terá tudo de novo” (“is the lover who is unafraid because she knows that she will experience it all again”; 84; Mazzara 53-4).

Lispector continues to emphasize this connection between sublimity and sexuality by implanting references to the sea, which reverberate as echoes of the above scene, in the final chapter in which Lóri and Ulisses make love. Here Lispector describes Ulisses as “perdido num mar de alegria e de ameaça de dor” (“lost in a sea of joy and the threat of pain”; 169; Mazzara 113), and Lóri “como se sua imagem se refletisse trêmula num açude de águas negras e translúcidas” (“as if her image were reflected tremulously in the dark, translucent waters of a dam”; 168; Mazzara 112). Unlike her description of Lóri’s swim in the ocean, however, in the final chapter Lispector does not go into the concrete details of the couple’s love-making, as if to suggest that the physical acts that occur between Lóri and Ulisses, as clearly defined by the rudiments of conventional heterosexual intercourse, obviate description—as if “nunca se inventou um modo diferente de amor de corpo [ . . . ]” (“no one has ever invented a different way of making love [ . . . ]”; 63; Mazzara 38).
In *Uma aprendizagem ou O livro dos prazeres*, Clarice Lispector offers her readers a vision of the sublime that wavers on the border between the Romantic sublime that we find in the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, as well as the mathematical sublime of Kant, and the boundary-less feminine sublime that Barbara Claire Freeman identifies in works such as Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*. Regarding the latter form of the sublime, there are passages in the novel—such as the scene by the pool—in which we see familiar cultural constructs overwhelmed by moments of sheer “[existence],” or being, that clearly signal the presence of the feminine sublime in Lispector’s text (Mazzara 47). However, while Lispector does much to break down the binaries that define traditional formulations of the sublime, her re-inscription of dualistic gender roles and of heterosexuality as the dominant social and sexual model attenuates the progress her novel makes towards depicting the sublime encounter as a move away from dualistic, rational thought towards irrationality, in which humankind can experience the sublimity of living in harmony with a presence that exceeds her, and that exceeds her comprehension.

The themes of sublimity and irrationality that we have identified in *Uma aprendizagem* are ones that we also find in Cristina Rivera Garza’s *La cresta de Ilión*. In *La cresta*, the ocean again serves as a primary manifestation of the sublime and as a central component in the protagonist’s voyage of self discovery. Just as, during her swim, Lóri comes to the realization that “quer ficar de pé parada no mar” (“she wants to remain standing still in the sea”; 85; Mazzara 54), by the end of *La cresta*, the nameless protagonist’s only desire is “estar solo y contemplar el océano” (“to be alone and contemplate the ocean”; Rivera Garza 163; my translation). Whereas, in *Uma aprendizagem*, Lóri’s encounter with the ocean appears as a reinscription of heterosexuality and the traditional male/female binary,
however, in *La cresta*, the ocean exists as a liminal space that facilitates the protagonist’s transition from a rational perspective to an irrational perspective, as well as a thorough re-conception of his gendered identity. Therefore, while, in *Uma aprendizagem*, heterosexuality and sublime experience are presented as being intimately related, in *La cresta*, sublimity is divorced from—and, in fact, resists association with—any particular sexual model. Instead, as I will demonstrate in the following chapter, in *La cresta de Ilión* Rivera Garza uses the connection between sublimity and irrationality to link sublime experience to queering, or the destabilization of culturally constructed definitions of language and gender.
1 The feminine sublime is a relationship to the sublime that Barbara Claire Freeman has developed from depictions of the sublime in both foundational and contemporary women’s fiction. Unlike classical conceptions of the sublime as an excess that man ultimately rationalizes in order to restore his identity as a unified subject, the subject’s encounter with the feminine sublime is an act of voluntarily “self-dispersal” or self-loss (Freeman 19). However, because this self-dispersal is freely chosen, an encounter with the feminine sublime represents an act of empowerment, rather than one of debilitation.

2 The fact that Lóri belongs to a privileged socio-economic group is what first leads her to experience the sublime. Lóri’s first sublime encounter occurs as a response to her boredom, a malaise that only tends to inflict the upper and middle classes.

3 See Earl E. Fitz’s Sexuality and Being in the Poststructuralist Universe of Clarice Lispector: The Différance of Desire.

4 In her critique of Neil Hertz’s analysis of Sappho’s phainetai moi and of Patricia Yaeger’s analysis of Chopin’s The Awakening, Freeman addresses their failure to recognize the absence of the sublime turn, and the consequent assertion of heterogeneity in these women’s works (20-6; 33-5). Rivera Garza’s La cresta de Ilión is another text that asserts heterogeneity by refusing to subordinate the excess of the sublime moment to the supremacy of reason—the “transcendent order” found in traditional representations of the sublime (Weiskel 24).

5 “It was Wordsworth who first attempted to assimilate the perception of everyday reality to the affective structure of the sublime in his great program of defamiliarization” (Weiskel 18-9).

6 This notion of the ocean as a vehicle of sublime irrationality is one that we will see further developed in Rivera Garza’s La cresta de Ilión.

7 This concept of forgetting prior factual knowledge will also constitute a major theme in La cresta, in which the protagonist claims that one of the essential functions of the ocean is to facilitate an act of “dejar de saber” (“to stop knowing” or “unknowing”; Rivera Garza 39).

8 The fact that Lispector’s preliminary note at the novel’s opening so closely echoes Lóri’s words strongly implies that this is the reading that she intended to convey: “Este livro se pediu uma libertade maior/que tive medo de dar./Ele está muito acima de mim. Humildemente tentei escrevê-lo./Eu sou mais forte do que eu” (“This book required a greater freedom/that I was afraid to give./It is far beyond me. Humbly, I tried to write it./I am stronger than myself”; Lispector; my translation).

9 As one of the key symbols of the sublime, the ocean also holds a central place in La cresta de Ilión. However, unlike Uma aprendizagem, in which Lóri’s encounter with the ocean is so clearly figured as an act of heterosexual intercourse, in La cresta the protagonist’s successive encounters with the ocean are associated with the loss or attentuation of fixed sexual identity.

10 For Kant, the sublime encounter functions as “a symbol of the mind’s relation to reason as “a transcendent order” (Weiskel 23). The Kantian sublime consists of three stages: a stage of “normal perception or comprehension,” a stage in which the subject’s perception is disrupted by an object whose size defies her ability to perceive it as a unity, and a third stage, commonly referred to as the sublime turn, in which the subject is able to integrate the sublime object into her comprehension via the power of reason (23).
CHAPTER 3
Why One Needs Writing and the Sea:
Cristina Rivera Garza’s La cresta de Ilión

We have seen that Clarice Lispector’s Uma aprendizagem ou O livro dos prazeres contains elements of both the Romantic and feminine sublimes. Lóri, the novel’s protagonist, responds to the sublime in its traditional manifestations, or at least to derivations thereof: the silence of a night in the mountains of Berne and the seemingly endless expanse of the ocean. Moreover, as characterizes Burke’s definition of the sublime, Lóri’s experience of sublimity appears as an antidote to the sense of banality that is the hallmark of the middle to upper-class modern subject. In keeping with definitions of the feminine sublime, Lóri’s sublime experience is characterized by voluntary dispossession, irrationality, and the collapsing of common binaries to form moments of paradox. However, one central binary that Lispector leaves intact, and even implicates in Lóri’s experience of sublimity, is the male-female gender binary. Therefore, while, in Uma aprendizagem, Lispector presents a version of sublimity that in many ways corresponds to Freeman’s analysis of the feminine sublime, the novel gestures to, but fails to deliver on the fuller implications of irrationality and paradox that it presents.

Distancing herself from previous generations of Mexican writers, Cristina Rivera Garza uses ambiguity to question culturally constructed definitions of language and gender. Along these same lines, her novel, La cresta de Ilión (Ilion’s Crest), represents both a return to and also a reworking of the feminine sublime found in Uma aprendizagem and other
earlier feminist texts. As Freeman asserts in *The Feminine Sublime*: “the sublime is a theoretical discourse, with its unique history, canon, and conventions, about the subject’s diverse responses to that which occurs at the very limits of symbolization” (3). As such, the feminine sublime exists as one instantiation of the sublime’s diverse history and, is therefore open to a process of de-familiarization, or queering: the use of alternate genders and sexualities to disrupt the purported internal coherence of gender identities, and thus “expand the boundaries of what is [. . .] culturally intelligible” (39).  

As opposed to *Uma aprendizagem*, in which Lispector closely aligns her formulation of the sublime with the male-female binary and heterosexual experience—thus perpetuating a reliance on duality in theorizations of sublimity, in *La cresta*, Rivera Garza utilizes the notion of sublimity as irrationality or incommensurability in order to link the experience of the sublime to the destabilization of culturally constructed definitions of language and gender, offering her readers a radical and exacting new version of sublimity through what amounts to a queering of the feminine sublime.

*La cresta de Ilión* opens, one stormy night, with the arrival of a young woman at the protagonist’s home. The young woman goes by the name of Amparo Dávila and claims to be a famous author. The protagonist, a doctor in a sea-side government hospital for the mentally and terminally ill, which functions more like a poorly-run hospice center, chooses to let the young woman stay with him. Soon afterward, a former girlfriend of the protagonist also arrives at his door, and the two women develop an amorous relationship, as well as a private language, that cause the doctor to feel alienated from his home. Their transgression of his personal boundaries reaches its peak when Amparo Dávila tells the doctor that she knows that he is secretly a woman. The doctor’s anger and resentment fuel his suspicions regarding
Amparo’s identity, and he embarks upon an investigation which leads him to the home of the “real” Amparo Dávila, who is still alive. The “false” Amparo, meanwhile, asks the doctor to retrieve a manuscript from the hospital archives from the file of Juan Escutia, a patient who, decades earlier, committed suicide by leaping from one of the hospital windows. The doctor finds the manuscript but does not give it to Amparo; when he is caught by the hospital Director, he is interrogated and treated as a hospital patient. After a second visit to the “real” Dávila, the protagonist finally suffers a psychic break, which causes him to be kept in the hospital for a longer period of time. Upon his release, the protagonist parts ways with the “false” Amparo Dávila, but not without acknowledging that he has also come to identify himself as a woman.

To this extent, La cresta de Ilión is a text that, like much of Rivera Garza’s writing, destabilizes the traditional male-female gender binary by queering the sexual orientations and gender identities of her characters—particularly that of her unnamed protagonist. As Georgina Muñoz Martínez claims in “Mujeres invasoras/Hombres árboles: La cresta de Ilión de Cristina Rivera Garza” (“Invader Women/Tree Men: Cristina Rivera Garza’s Ilion’s Crest”), “el suyo no es el relato de un hombre que se transforma en mujer sino el proceso de aceptación de su doble condición genérica y de la movilidad entre ambas” (“[the protagonist’s story] is not the story of a man that becomes a woman; instead it is the story of his process of accepting his dual gender condition and his mobility between the two”; 274-5; my translation). Through this process, the protagonist comes to desconocer (to un-know) himself as to the restrictive gender and sexual identities that he has been assigned, thus embracing the broader field of gender and sexual identifications available to him.
La cresta de Ilión not only poses questions regarding the gender identity of its protagonist, however; it is also a self-reflexive text that interrogates its own method of meaning-making through language use. As Carlos Castellanos argues in his article on La cresta de Ilión, this is a novel that operates through its lack of definitive meaning—whose ambiguity opens the text to multiple interpretations and invites its reader to ask questions about the construction of gender identity, as well as more general questions about the construction of meaning and reality. In one of his studies on a dialogic theory of cultural liminality, Lauro Zavala writes that:

parody and self-reflexive writing arise whenever a cultural tradition achieves a canonical status, and, therefore, when this tradition ceases to have an immediate meaning to its readers [...] By observing carefully what is being parodied and what is being ironized in metafiction, it is possible to understand what might come to change in a cultural tradition, in relation to its specific historical context. (13)

While La cresta de Ilión may be difficult to identify as a work of parody, it is certainly a work of cultural and generational liminality that seeks to engage the writing of an earlier generation of women writers while simultaneously allowing those literary tropes to be transformed by contemporary theoretical perspectives. The main feminist literary tropes that Rivera Garza incorporates and thus interrogates in her writing are the gaze, women’s language and writing, the body, and the feminine sublime. By making these feminist tropes the domain of a male/gender-neutral subject, Rivera Garza makes them available to a new generation of readers informed by Judith Butler’s theories of gender performance and queer theory, thus retaining their literary and conceptual value while freeing them from their categorization as essentially feminist or female.

As follows from Judith Butler’s definition of sex as a discursive binary masquerading as prediscursive ontology (11), disrupting the purported internal coherence of sexual
identities involves revealing the extent to which these identities are discursive, as products of existing masculine discourse and power relations. As such, the process of gender queering undertaken by Rivera Garza in *La cresta de Ilión* naturally parallels the discursive defamiliarization that serves as the modus operandi for contemporary Language Poets, the poetic philosophy commonly known as “making strange.” In the following quote from an interview with Emily Hind, Rivera Garza expresses the affinity between her project of gender queering and the project of Language Poets such as Stephen McCaffery, whose book-length poem *Panopticon* she uses to introduce *La cresta*:

> prefiero la literatura para la cual el lenguaje no es simple representación de lo real, sino herramienta para el análisis del mismo. Prefiero la literatura que me des-familiariza el mundo, donde no me encuentro, lo que los Language Poets entre otros llaman *making strange*. Prefiero la literatura para la cual los géneros son puntos de partida, problematizaciones performativas, y no principios estáticos o puntos de llegada. (189)
>
*I prefer literature in which language is not a simple representation of the real, but is instead a tool for analyzing [the real]. I prefer literature that defamiliarizes the world for me, where I don’t find myself—what the Language Poets, among others, call *making strange*. I prefer literature in which genders are points of departure—performative problematizations—and not static principles or points of arrival.* (my translation)

The inclusion of a quote from *Panopticon* at the beginning of *La cresta de Ilión* further emphasizes the relevance of this poetic philosophy to Rivera Garza’s work in that McCaffery’s lines serve as a metaphor for the work of defamiliarization, or queering, that Rivera Garza’s novel undertakes: “The textual intention presupposes readers who know the language conspiracy in operation. The mark is not in-itself but in-relation-to-other-marks. The mark seeks the seeker of the system behind the events. *The mark inscribes the i which is the her in the it which meaning moves through*” (my emphasis). Like *La cresta de Ilión*, these lines from McCaffery’s poem offer the reader a familiar definition of reality which it then proceeds to undermine. By destabilizing the meaning of the very terms it employs,
McCaffery’s poem parodies the notion of a language conspiracy or panopticon that it introduces, just as Rivera Garza’s novel first delineates, then disrupts the purported internal coherence of gender identities.

These lines from McCaffery’s poem have even further implications for the novel, however. In its complete form, McCaffery’s poem consists of dialogue between the above passage, featured in all caps, and another passage: a storyline resembling a Harlequin romance about a woman named Ambiguity. Initially, the above theoretical passage overshadows the narrative, influencing one’s reading of the latter. However, over the course of the poem the two passages begin to bleed into each other, each eventually transforming the other into two new narratives. La cresta de Ilión is also structured as a meeting between two narratives or discourses in that it comprises a conversation between feminist literature and postmodern gender theory. As I demonstrate throughout this chapter, in her novel Rivera Garza relocates traditionally feminist literary tropes—including the gaze, women’s language, and the female body—into the domain of a protagonist whose gender identity she subsequently queers, or destabilizes, in accordance with queer theory and Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance. Through this interaction, each of these two discursive systems—feminist literature and postmodern gender theory—is transformed into a literary entity that is neither ontological nor epistemological, but that oscillates in the tension that their meeting creates. As such, the form of Rivera Garza’s novel mirrors the enigma at the very heart of the sublime: the “semiotic discontinuity in the inexplicable passage between one order or discourse and another” (Weiskel 17). Like the character Ambiguity in the narrative portion of McCaffery’s Panopticon, the ambiguity of Rivera Garza’s fictional text
has a transformative effect on the theoretical discourses that it engages, not the least of which is the feminine sublime.

In order to unpack this matrix I will first briefly summarize the classical definitions of these feminist tropes: the gaze, women’s language and writing, the body, and the feminine sublime; and then demonstrate the way in which each of these interacts with—shapes and is shaped by—postmodern conceptions of gender within the novel. Because the first three of these tropes coalesce into the larger theme of the feminine sublime, I will first address the gaze, women’s language and writing, and the body, and conclude by demonstrating the way in which each of these contributes to the unique instantiation of the feminine sublime within La cresta.

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey theorizes the concept of the gaze as the empowerment of the male subject through the act of looking at the female body, and the simultaneous disempowerment of the female subject as the passive object of male spectatorship. A film theorist, Mulvey was influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis to claim that the cinematic gaze, like the unconscious, was structured like a language and that, in film as in language, the image of woman functioned primarily as “a signifier for the male other” (Mulvey 2182). According to Mulvey, mainstream cinema offered two avenues of escape from the threat of “castration anxiety” that the woman’s image ultimately and inherently evokes: either “the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object” as in genre of film noir, or, alternately, “overvaluation, the cult of the female star” (2188). When asked to explain the necessarily distinct gaze of the female subject, Mulvey drew from Freud, arguing that “if cinematic representation is seen as the mise-en-scène of desire [. . .] it may offer the female spectator multiple subject positions, both male and female” (Phoca 57).
However, since Mulvey’s theory is built upon theories of psychoanalysis, the concept of the gaze is seemingly irrevocably marked by ontological conceptions of gender as an essentially masculine experience.

If we take a close look at Rivera Garza’s *La cresta de Ilión*, it is obvious that the novel opens by entering into a dialogue with Mulvey’s concept of the gaze. When the protagonist questions himself as to why he has admitted Amparo Dávila into his home, he responds by recurring to a fairly stereotypical version of the gaze: “lo que realmente capturó mi atención fue el hueso derecho de su pelvis que [. . .] se dejaba ver bajo la camiseta desbastillada y justo sobre el elástico de la pretina. Tardé mucho tiempo en recordar el nombre específico de esa parte del hueso pero, sin duda, la búsqueda se inició en ese instante. La deseé” (“what really caught my attention was the right bone of her pelvis that [. . .] could be seen beneath her un-hemmed shirt and just above her elastic waistband. It took me a long time to remember the specific name of this part of the bone, but my search undoubtedly began in this moment. I wanted her”; 14). By assuming the support of his implied male audience and offering an explanation to his implied female audience, the narrator alludes to the nature of the gaze as both universally and ontologically masculine: “Los hombres, estoy seguro, me entenderán sin necesidad de otro comentario. A las mujeres les digo que esto sucede con frecuencia y sin patrón estable” (“The men, I am sure, will understand me with no need of further comment. To the women, I will say that [this type of thing] occurs frequently and without [following] a particular pattern”; 14-5). The narrator’s desire leads him to imagine Amparo in a series of sensual situations that confirm Mulvey’s theory of the gaze as a source of masculine empowerment. When the narrator returns from his erotic reverie to
find Amparo cold and trembling before him, he affirms that “ya lo sabía todo de ella” (”I already knew everything about her”; 15).

The gaze, as Carlos Castellanos recognizes in “Ambigüedad en la identidad: La cresta de Ilión de Cristina Rivera Garza” (“Ambiguity in Identity: Cristina Rivera Garza’s La cresta de Ilión”), is the problematic nexus of Rivera Garza’s text: “El punto de partida de la travesía del deseo siempre postergado es la mirada, gaze supuestamente varonil, dirigida por el/la protagonista hacia el hueso iliac de Amparo” (“The point of departure for this voyage of continuously postponed desire is the look, the supposedly masculine gaze, that the protagonist directs at Amparo’s iliac bone”; 112; my translation). We readers have to wait until the novel’s conclusion to learn the name of the bone that has so captured the protagonist’s attention: “el hueso ilión, uno de los tres que forman la cintura pelviana” (“the ilium, one of the three bones that make up the pelvis”; 173). In this same passage, the narrator establishes a link between “la cresta ilíaca” (“the iliac crest”) and “la cresta de Ilión” (“Ilion’s crest”; 173), the point from which Odysseus departs on his return voyage to Ithaca, thereby establishing a parallel between the opening of that epic journey and the protagonist’s first glimpse of Amparo’s pelvis. By extension, one can also identify a parallel between the odyssey of Ulysses and the psychological journey undertaken by the protagonist of La cresta. Thus, in more ways than one, the gaze and the desire for possession that it represents provide the central structuring force— “la fuerza motriz” —for this novel of self-discovery (Castellanos 112).

This first scene in which the protagonist defines his relationship with Amparo Dávila as one of desire is quickly complicated by the passage that follows it, in which the protagonist confesses that the first emotion Amparo had inspired in him was not desire, but
fear. Here, the narrator’s initial evocation of the virginal feminine body is overlaid with a vision of the grotesque female body, causing the reader’s image of Amparo to shape-shift like a hologram. As the narrator explains: “Ustedes [las mujeres] provocan miedo. A veces uno confunde esa caída, esa inmovilidad, esa desarticulación con el deseo. Pero abajo, [. . .] entre las raíces más fundamentales del ser, uno siempre está listo para la aparición del miedo” (“[You women] inspire fear. At times one confuses this fall, this immobility, this disarticulation, with desire. But underneath, [. . .] within the most fundamental roots of a person’s being, one is always ready for the appearance of fear”; 17). At first, the protagonist’s fear at the sight of Amparo seems to be motivated by an inevitable attack of Freudian castration anxiety. However, the narrator’s reinterpretation of the gaze as one of fear is further complicated by Amparo’s own gaze: “el poder expansivo de su mirada” (“the expansive power of her gaze”; 14), which has the effect of widening the space around her. In this second account of his first encounter with Amparo, it is she rather than the male protagonist who is empowered through the act of looking, and he who feels himself to be deaf, lost, and alone (19). By thus inverting the subject and object of the traditional masculine gaze, making a female character into its perpetrator, Rivera Garza undermines a definition of the gaze as ontologically masculine. The author does not stop at a simple inversion of the subject and object positions of the gaze, however. Over the course of the novel, the gaze is transformed from a look of desire and objectification into one of recognition as the narrator comes to identify as a woman, an argument that I will take up after examining Rivera Garza’s treatment of other feminist literary tropes.

Another key trope of feminism that appears in Rivera Garza’s novel is that of a woman’s language as seen in the secret language that develops between the “false” Amparo
Dávila and *la Traicionada* (the Betrayed One), the protagonist’s former girlfriend. This language, which further exacerbates the protagonist’s sense of estrangement from his female guests, gestures to the writing of feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, who viewed the dualistic structure of language as essentially masculine and theorized on the creation of a woman’s language that would privilege the multiple over the singular (Guerra 70-1). In her introduction to Irigaray’s “When Our Lips Speak Together,” Carolyn Burke writes that the French feminist’s theory of a woman’s language “(aimed) at a radical interrogation of ‘meaning,’ which comprises opening discourse to the sense of ‘non-sense,’ reshaping syntax to suspend its teleological patterns, embracing fragmentation and risking ‘incoherence’ in order to loosen the resistance of language to the ‘female’” (66). Irigaray’s woman’s language is therefore similar to the irrational component of the feminine sublime as seen in *Uma aprendizagem* in that it features the rejection of rational or, in other words, dualistic thought. According to Irigaray’s postulates, this alternate language would emphasize touch over sight and fluidity over unity or stability, and it would contribute to the creation of a community of women, in which state power would be replaced by the embodied force of ancestral femininity. Moreover, like the secret language in *La cresta de Ilión*, Irigaray’s own representation of the woman’s language is structured as an imaginary dialogue between two female lovers (Burke 67).

As such, Rivera Garza’s description of the secret language that develops between Amparo and *la Traicionada* at first appears as the pure realization of Irigaray’s utopic vision. Rivera Garza begins, as does Irigaray, by linking the structure of this language to the structure of the female body. The narrator likens the concentration required to apprehend the language to that which he used when trying to master the anatomical structure of the body in
medical school: “me concentraba como sólo lo había hecho antes, muchos años antes, frente a los libros de anatomía” (“I concentrated as I had only done earlier, many years earlier, in front of my anatomy textbooks”; 41). Their language is also characterized by a fluidity created by the incessant repetition of the syllable “glu,” and further emphasized by the narrator’s comparison of the language to the sound of rainfall: “El sonido de los vocablos era insoportablemente melódioso, casi dulce . . . parecían replicar el eco de la lluvia, el momento en que una gota de agua cae pesada y definitiva sobre la corteza del mar” (“The sound of the syllables was insupportably melodious, almost sweet . . . they seemed to replicate the echo of the rain, the moment in which a drop of water falls heavy and definitive over the surface of the sea”; 41). The connection between this secret language and Irigaray’s theory of a woman’s language is reinforced later in the novel when the “real” Amparo Dávila asks the protagonist if he has touched words: “¿Has tocado las palabras?,” and her question is followed by an echo of the above water image:

—No —dije, con toda sinceridad. (153)
—No —I said in all sincerity.

For the protagonist, this tangible, feminine language constitutes an exclusive realm that disarms him and to which he is denied access; as he declares: “No podía hacer nada contra su lenguaje. No podía entrar en él” (“When faced with their language I was helpless. I could not break into it”; 41). Here, as in the narrator’s first account of his meeting of Amparo, Rivera Garza plays on her readers’ dualistic assumptions; like the narrator himself, we are led to believe that the reason he cannot understand his guests’ language is because he is a man. Our initial impressions of the women’s private language conform to the notion of a woman’s
language as theorized by Irigaray, while also replicating the exclusivity of a feminism that functions through the inversion of patriarchy, envisioning a utopic community of ancestral femininity that is inaccessible to men.

The novel’s “linguistic turn” occurs when *la Traicionada* attempts to address Amparo in their secret language during a visit from the male hospital director to the protagonist’s home. At first, it seems that Amparo will not respond to her, and the protagonist (not to mention the reader) is ready to interpret this as a betrayal of the female community that they have established. It is the hospital director who then answers *la Traicionada*’s prompt with: “Glu hiserfui glu trenji fredso glu, glu-glu” (130), defying our expectations and undermining our dualistic assumptions about the rules governing the language. Like the reader, the protagonist responds to the hospital director’s ability to speak in his guests’ secret language with a series of unanswered questions, such as “por qué él [. . .] y por qué yo no” (“why him [. . .] and why not me”; 130). At first the narrator recurs to the hospital director’s effeminateness, his “indudable gusto sofisticado” (“undeniably sophisticated taste”; 131), for the reason why the director is able to enter into the language, assuming it to be the domain of women and homosexual men. This interpretation is further complicated, however, by the fact that the hospital director seems to be sexually attracted to Amparo, thus undermining our attempts to interpret access to the language as predetermined by either gender or sexual preference. The hospital director’s attraction to Amparo—he seems to share the protagonist’s desire for her hip bone—convinces the narrator that, while the hospital director appears to share a special bond with these women, he does not truly understand them. Even here, however, the protagonist is mistaken, since he is later to learn that the hospital director’s desire is not directed toward Amparo, but rather toward *la Traicionada*. In Rivera Garza’s
novel, what first appeared unmistakable as a women’s language becomes the domain of characters whose gender and sexual identities are shifting and “unstable.” The protagonist’s process of unknowing with respect to this language is the same process of unknowing that he experiences with respect to his own gendered identity, and which ultimately allows him to enter into the “women’s” language as an active participant.

Returning to the link between language and the body, the third trope of feminist literature that we see undergoing a process of queering in Rivera Garza’s novel is that of the body and the notion of gender or sex as biologically determined. While foundational feminist theories like those of Luce Irigarary hold gender to be a culturally constructed category distinct from and secondary to the ontological reality of biological sex, contemporary queer theory interprets biological sex as just one of the many by-products of the performative act of gender. In her seminal work *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that gender is a performance—a sustained “corporeal . . . strategy”—which produces the category of sex, and that, therefore, sex itself should also be understood as a cultural construction (177).

In *La cresta de Ilión*, Rivera Garza engages this question of gender through the protagonist’s own process of gender transformation. Early in the novel, the “false” Amparo Dávila informs the protagonist that she knows that he is a woman, a surprising piece of information which the “real” Amparo Dávila later confirms. As Oswaldo Estrada observes in his article on *La cresta*, like the protagonist himself, “the readers are left without any clues to solve the enigma of why this woman a priori confronts his masculinity” (68). While the doctor believes Amparo to be in the wrong, the notion still haunts him, and he begins to suffer a crisis of gender identity. He responds to this crisis by going on a veritable binge of gender performance, enacting his masculinity in order to reassure himself that he is a man.
and not a woman. The narrator locates his maleness in both his sexual orientation and in his body; the day after Amparo accuses the narrator of womanhood, he touches himself in the mirror to make sure that his sexual organs are still in place: “Toqué mi sexo y, con evidente alivio, comprobé que mi pene y mis testículos seguían en su sitio” (“I touched my genitals and, with evident relief, confirmed that my penis and testicles remained intact”; 67). When he is again perturbed by questions of gender identity while driving his female coworkers into the city, he responds by masturbating by the side of the road and, subsequently, by engaging in intercourse and other sexually explicit behavior with these women. However, as Georgina Muñoz Martínez notes in “Mujeres invasoras/Hombres árboles,” it is interesting that the protagonist here engages the women in anal sex rather than vaginal intercourse, and that he experiences the greatest sexual pleasure when one of the women inserts what he thinks is a candle into his rectum. Thus, even as the protagonist attempts to strengthen his masculine identity through a performance of masculine sexuality, masculine sexuality itself is revealed as highly variable and unstable.

Later we learn that the protagonist’s sexual experiences are not limited to those with women and that there was a time before his confinement to traditional definitions of masculine subjectivity—during “ese período nebuloso en que el yo todavía no adquiere los candados de la costumbre de los significados” (“that nebulous period in which the I still hasn’t acquired the padlocks of customary meanings”)—when he had had an amorous relationship with another man (123). Not only was the protagonist’s gendered identity at that time relatively ambiguous; for him, so was that of his lover: “No se trataba, pues, de un hombre, sino de Alguien, así, sin más: Alguien con los rizos rubios cayéndole en cascada sobre la frente; Alguien con la boca ancha y los ojos turbios; Alguien con tiempo de sobra en
los bolsillos” (“It wasn’t necessarily a man, but a Someone—that and nothing more: Someone with blond curls cascading over their forehead; Someone with a wide mouth and blurry eyes; Someone with extra time [on their hands]”; 123). As Estrada argues, by allowing himself to remember this experience of desire for “Alguien” —a person whose individual identity overcame the need for gender definition—the protagonist “places himself in the middle of the invisible bridge that connects women and men; and he finally reveals his true gender identity as an ambiguous range that has little to do with his physical appearance as a man” (73). The fact that the protagonist allows himself to remember this experience soon after his first release from *La Granja* (The Farm), the hospital for terminally ill patients, is one of the first inroads he makes into questioning his given identity and recognizing himself in what he had previously identified as *other*. Moreover, his act of remembering or reflection, (“retroceder”), is something the protagonist finds that he shares with the “false” Amparo and that allows him to begin to empathize and identify with her (125).

The final feminist trope that Rivera Garza explores in her novel, and the one that incorporates all those previously discussed, is that of the feminine sublime. Unlike the sublime of Lispector’s *Uma aprendizagem*, which inhabits a middle ground between Freeman’s feminine sublime and more traditional, Romantic conceptions of the sublime, the sublime that appears in *La cresta* is unmistakable as the feminine sublime that Freeman identifies as characteristic of modern and contemporary women’s literature. In *La cresta de Ilión*, the feminine sublime is apparent in the principal character’s relationship to the sea, which functions as a liminal space that facilitates his process of unknowing reality and re-conceiving his gendered identity. It is through his relationship to the sea that the protagonist
comes to recognize that which cannot be expressed: the excess that remains in any attempt to clearly demarcate self from other.

From the very first scene in which Amparo arrives at the protagonist’s door, the sea appears as the central guiding image of the novel. When Amparo sees the ocean through the protagonist’s large windows, she appears to have found something that she was seeking: “cuando finalmente pudo vislumbrar el contorno del océano, suspiró ruidosamente. Parecía aliviada de algo pesado y amenazador. Daba la impresión de que había encontrado lo que buscaba” (“when she could finally discern the outline of the ocean, she sighed loudly. She seemed relieved of a heavy and threatening weight. It seemed that she had found what she was looking for”; 16). Later we learn that the narrator’s decision to live in isolation working in a home for terminally or mentally ill patients was strongly influenced by his desire to be near the sea: “mi obsesiva fascinación por el océano [. . .], sin duda, había determinado con mucho mi decisión de aceptar este trabajo” (“my obsessive fascination with the ocean [. . .] had, undoubtedly, largely determined my decision to accept this job”; 28). The sense of separation that the protagonist experiences as the smell of the sea fades on his drive from the coast to the city reveals the extent to which the sea occupies a central focus of his attention: “Me concentré, como era mi costumbre en este trayecto en detectar cómo iba desvaneciéndose el olor marino, un fenómeno que, para completarse en su totalidad, usualmente tomaba entre dieciocho y veinticinco minutos de camino. Después ya todo era tierra y cemento. Después ya todo era la realidad” (“I concentrated, as I was accustomed to on this trajectory, on detecting how the scent of the sea slowly dissipated—a phenomenon that usually took between eighteen to twenty-five minutes to complete. Afterwards everything was land and cement. Afterwards everything was reality”; 68). At this early point
in the novel, the protagonist’s relationship to the sea is one of escape; its “masiva presencia” (“massive presence”) allows him to believe that reality is mundane and insignificant and thus not worth worrying about (32). The protagonist views his own life as merely a reflection of those of his terminally ill patients, and, for him, the ocean is the morphine that shields him from reality: “sin [el océano], el peso de la realidad sería mortal para mí” (“without [the ocean], the weight of reality would be deadly for me”; 32). The arrival of Amparo and la Tracionada, however, inspires the protagonist to develop a new relationship with the sublimity of the sea, in a process that is intrinsically related to his meeting of the “real” Amparo Dávila, and over which he feels he has little control.

The narrator describes discovering Dávila’s address and phone number in much the same way as he described the “false” Amparo’s first sighting of the ocean: “Lo hojeé [el directorio telefónico] sin saber muy bien qué estaba buscando. Luego, cuando lo encontré, lo supe todo de manera fulminante y clara” (“I leafed through [the telephone book] without really knowing what I was looking for. Then, when I found it, I knew everything suddenly and clearly”; 73). Moreover, on the eve of his first meeting with the “real” Dávila, the protagonist explains that his desire to meet her had changed from “un interés de investigador” to “una urgencia vital,” (from “an investigative interest” to “a vital urge”), and that this encounter would somehow change his way of experiencing the ocean: “Ya me había dejado yo de preguntar sobre la verdad, para empezar a explorar el fundamento mismo de lo real. Estaba en pos de algo nuevo; algo que, de una manera u otra, cambiaría mi modo de sentir el océano. Ésa era la magnitud de mi tarea. Así la presentía. Y así fui hacia ella” (“I had already stopped asking about the truth and had started to explore the very foundation of the real. I was in search of something new; something that, in one way or another, would
change the way I perceived the ocean. That was the magnitude of my task. That is how I understood it. And that is how I applied myself to it”; 79; my emphasis). Just as, in Uma aprendizagem, Lóri’s burgeoning relationship with Ulisses leads to her sublime encounter with the sea; in La cresta, the narrator’s meeting with the “real” Amparo leads to his nascent awareness of the sublimity of the ocean. The following passage appears immediately following the protagonist’s account of his first visit to Dávila’s home, in the center of an otherwise blank page: “Uno necesita el mar para esto: para dejar de creer en la realidad. Para hacerse preguntas imposibles. Para no saber. Para dejar de saber. Para embriagarse del olor. Para cerrar los ojos. Para dejar de creer en la realidad” (“This is why you need the sea: to stop believing in reality. To ask yourself impossible questions. To not know. To stop knowing. To become heady from the scent. To close your eyes. To stop believing in reality”; 95). While, for the protagonist, the sea still implies a distancing or estrangement from reality, this distancing is no longer one of escape, but instead involves a process of un-knowing through the asking of impossible, or unanswerable questions. Although the sea conserves some of its earlier comforts—its intoxicating smell, for example—its effect on the protagonist is no longer one of sedation, but of an encounter with the feminine sublime.

Part of the protagonist’s “dejar de creer en la realidad” is his ceasing to believe in the reality of his own male identity through reflections such as this: “Ante el mar pensé que, después de todo, si por alguna desgraciada casualidad yo era en realidad una mujer, nada cambiaría [. . .] Todo podría seguir siendo igual” (“Standing before the sea I thought that, if I was after all by some unfortunate chance a woman, nothing would change [. . .] Everything could go on as it was”; 108). As such, the protagonist’s new “modo de sentir el océano” (“way of perceiving the ocean”) is one of voluntarily self-dispersal, echoing that of the
female protagonists Freeman analyzes in her text (79). We see this sense of self-dispersal again in a subsequent encounter with the sea, in which the protagonist becomes aware of the inexpressible excess pregnant in silence:

¿Así que de esto se trataba todo?, me pregunté de repente, como si hubiera podido dar con la respuesta adecuada. No sabía, de hecho, a qué me refería. El silencio bañó mis palabras y [...] entonces, sumido en la materia viscosa de las cosas indecibles, retrocedí [...] Supongo que las mujeres han entendido. A los hombres, básteles saber que esto ocurre más frecuentemente de lo que pensamos. (109)

So this is what it was all about?, I asked myself suddenly, as if I could have come up with an adequate response. In fact, I didn’t actually know what I was referring to. The silence bathed my words and [...] then, immersed in the viscous material of the inexpressible, I went back [...] I assume that the women have understood. To the men, [I’ll say that] it’s enough for you to know that this occurs more frequently than we think.

The narrator’s assumption of his female readers’ conspiration echoes and reverses his earlier assumption of male support surrounding the masculine gaze. By assuming that female readers will easily recognize and identify with his otherwise obscure experience of excess, the narrator clearly demarcates the feminine sublime as women’s knowledge. We see this same demarcation in the similarity between the protagonist’s description of the female lovers’ secret language: “La repetían incesantemente [la sílaba ‘glu’] y, al hacerlo, parecían replicar el eco de la lluvia, el momento en que una gota de agua cae pesada y definitiva sobre la corteza del mar” (“They repeated [the syllable ‘glu’] incessantly, and, upon doing so, they seemed to replicate the echo of the rain, the moment in which a drop of water falls heavy and definitive over the surface of the sea”; 41), and the following quote from Barbara Freeman: “Words at their most sublime have the force and feel of water” (26). If we are to believe, in accordance with Irigaray’s theory, that women’s language is/should be a reflection of women’s knowledge, this linkage between the sea, the feminine sublime, and women’s
language would seem to indicate that women’s knowledge is irrevocably bound up with, or even originates in an experience of the feminine sublime.

As with all the other feminist literary tropes in the text, Rivera Garza does not spare this one from queering. Although the protagonist himself codifies his experience of the sublime as feminine, by making an experience of the feminine sublime available to a protagonist who is figured as male but whose gender is largely in question, Rivera Garza complicates the notion of the feminine sublime as exclusively feminine. Moreover, the author complicates earlier feminist representations of the sublime by creating a protagonist who does not respond to his experience of the feminine sublime through suicide or disappearance, although both of these options are clearly present in the novel. In *Uma Amprendizagem,* Lóri’s apprehension of the feminine sublime via pleasure leads her to long for the further sublimity she believes will be possible in death (110). Similarly, in Juan Escutia’s tragic leap from the sun-filled hospital room window and the pelican’s fatal plunge into the sea, and in the narrator’s description of the “false” Amparo as a desaparecida (a disappeared person), Rivera Garza provides clear echoes of the problematic responses to sublime experience found in foundational feminist texts. The protagonist of *La cresta,* however, denies these responses while still validating his experience of the feminine sublime. An echo of McCaffery’s poem, *Panopticon,* the terms of this text do not signify as expected, complicating their meanings in a way that Freeman would appreciate.

Although, in her interview with Hind, Rivera Garza denies ascribing to any particular theoretical school of thought, it is useful to read *La cresta de Ilión,* and much of Rivera Garza’s other esoteric writing with an awareness of Freeman’s concept of the feminine sublime. Rivera Garza has frequently been compared to Franz Kafka (1883-1924), who is
himself a model of both *making strange*—reviving language’s dead metaphors—as well as of what Weiskel refers to as the metaphorical, or reader’s, sublime. In contrast to the metonymical, or poet’s, sublime that we saw in *Uma aprendizagem*, which arises from an excess of the signified, the metaphorical sublime is characterized by an excess of signifiers, or by signifiers that cannot be easily traced to a corresponding signified, and in which “the absence of a signified itself assumes the status of a signifier” (Weiskel 28). In the case of literature, metaphorically sublime writing, such as that of Kafka and Rivera Garza, contains allegories whose vehicles cannot be traced back to an underlying tenor and that, therefore, cause the reader to feel as if these allegories were “somehow meaningful but not quite graspable” (Goodman as qtd. in Weiskel 29). As such, the effect of metaphorically sublime writing is the same as that of silence in *Uma aprendizagem*, or of the ocean in *La cresta*; it is writing that ultimately “(teases) us out of thought” (Weiskel 29).

It is significant, given this fact, that Rivera Garza’s poem “Poética” (“Poetics”), featured in an anthology of poetry by contemporary Mexican women writers, is almost an exact replica of the above passage she uses to describe her protagonist’s renewed experience of the sea. In this poem, Rivera Garza delineates her poetic philosophy as follows:


This is why you need (writing): to stop believing in reality. To ask yourself impossible questions. To not know. To stop knowing. To become heady from the scent. To close your eyes. To stop believing in reality.

In these parallel passages, Rivera Garza conflates the sublime experience and the act of writing: both involve the act of unknowing, of self-dispersal, of “*making strange*” (Rivera Garza as qtd. in Hind 189). Rivera Garza’s writing thus embraces sublimity at the levels of
both content and method. Through this concept of the feminine sublime as both irreducible excess and voluntary self-dispersal, we can begin to understand the protagonist’s recognition of the “false” Amaro Dávila both as himself: “Mi” (“Me”; 166), and at the same time something irrevocably other: “Quedábamos ella y yo, y un océano de por medio” (“She and I remained, and between us an ocean”; 168). It is through the protagonist’s awareness of the feminine sublime that he develops the ability to speak to la Traicionada in the previously incomprehensible women’s language. The protagonist’s stereotypical masculine gaze thus transforms into a look of recognition as he claims the secret of his own womanhood and the sublimity of his ambiguous gender identity. How else to understand Rivera Garza’s concluding passage?:

No pude recordar su rostro después. Recordé, en cambio, el nombre del hueso que había despertado mi deseo y mi miedo al mismo tiempo. El hueso ilión, uno de los tres que forman la cintura pelviana. Un hueso ancho y acampanado, cuyas alas se extienden a cada lado de la espina dorsal. Al punto anterosuperior de las alas de ilión se le llama la cresta ilíaca. Desde ahí, desde Ilión, desde su cresta, Ulises partió de regreso a Ítaca después de la Guerra.

Sonreía al recordar también que la pelvis es el área más eficaz para determinar el sexo de un individuo. Todas las Emisarias debieron de saberlo para poder dar con mi secreto. (173)

Afterwards I couldn’t remember her face. Instead I remembered the name of the bone that had awakened my desire and, at the same time, my fear. The ilium, one of the three bones that make up the pelvis. A wide and flared bone, whose wings extend on either side of the dorsal spine. The anterosuperior point of the wings of the ilium is called the iliac crest. It was from there, from Ilion, from its crest, that Ulysses left to return to Ithaca after the War.

I smiled, remembering that the pelvis is also the most effective area [to use] to determine an individual’s sex. All of the Emissaries must have known it to be able to guess my secret.

In this passage Rivera Garza offers her most complex queering of the novel, in which it is gender, or the culturally constructed, that determines or shapes the body, the material/ontological. It is as if Rivera Garza were responding directly to Butler’s question “To what extent does the body come into being in and through the mark(s) of gender?” (13).
Through the act of queering, Rivera Garza, reveals these marks of gender to be nothing more than an excess of signifiers with no underlying signified. Thus, by releasing her reader from a habitual perception of gender identity as ontology, Rivera Garza reveals the sublimity of gender itself. In her writing, it is not only language, but also gender that is made strange, creating what is essentially a queer sublime.

At the same time, by gesturing to the sublime potential of the generative female body, this concluding image conserves a certain ontological residue, leaving us with a literary creation that is neither feminist literature nor gender theory, but which, like the ocean, calls us to ask ourselves impossible questions—questions of unknowing or dispersal—about each one.9 In *La cresta*, the feminine sublime thus forms not only the means of the narrator’s journey of self-discovery, but also the conclusion that we are left with as readers, as the ambiguity of the novel’s final passage makes present the insuperable gap, or *lacunae*, between performative and ontological orders of discourse.
An author who utilizes the technique of queering will first present a familiar image of gendered identity and then subsequently undermine the coherence of that image in order to reveal the extent to which the identity is discursively constructed.

Critics such as Gabriela Mercado and Georgina Muñoz Martínez have already demonstrated the way in which La cresta de Ilión is structured as a dialogue between Rivera Garza and fellow Mexican writer Amparo Dávila.

It is interesting to note that the word “género” in Spanish means both ‘gender’ and ‘genre.’ Although in this case Rivera Garza is clearly referring to ‘gender,’ the above quote could also be used to characterize her perspective on genre(s), as evidenced by her poem “De(s)generamiento” (“On (de)Genre-ation”), as well as by her novels Lo anterior (What Was Before) (2004) and La muerte me da (Death Hits) (2007) (my translation).

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey summarizes the controversial basis of Lacanian theory: “the function of woman in forming the patriarchal unconscious is twofold: she firstly symbolizes the castration threat by her real lack of a penis and secondly thereby raises her child into the symbolic” or “the dimension of language, law, and the father” (2182). Thus, by serving as an ever-present reminder of the lack that characterizes those outside the patriarchal order, the woman frightens her male child into participating in that order.

All translations of Rivera Garza’s text are my own.

Rivera Garza establishes said connection between Amparo’s “cresta ilíaca” (“iliac crest”) and Ulysses’s “cresta de Ilión” (“Ilión’s crest”) in the following passage: “Recordé [. . .] el nombre del hueso que había despertado mi deseo y mi miedo al mismo tiempo. El hueso ilión [. . .] Al punto anterosuperior de las alas de ilión se le llama la cresta ilíaca. Desde ahí, desde Ilión, desde su cresta, Ulises partió de regreso a Ítaca después de la Guerra” (“[. . .] I remembered the name of the bone that had awakened my desire and, at the same time, my fear. The ilium [. . .] The anterosuperior point of the wings of the ilium is called the iliac crest. It was from there, from Ilion, from its crest, that Ulysses left to return to Ithaca after the War”; 173).

Amparo is not Rivera Garza’s only female character described as capable of distorting the space around her; in Nadie me verá llorar (No One Will See Me Cry) (1999), the narrator explains that “por donde quiera que camina lleva toda la luz del manicomio sobre la cabeza” (“wherever she goes she carries all the light in the insane asylum over her head”; 26), and that “cuando Matilda vuelve el rostro y lo recibe con la sonrisa franca, los sonidos desaparecen por completo [. . .] Matilda siempre creará silencio a su alrededor” (“when Matilda turns her head and receives him with her frank smile, the sounds disappear completely [. . .] Matilda will always create silence around her”; 28).

The protagonists of many earlier feminist texts undertake problematic, if not victimizing, responses to the sublime encounter. For example, in Chopin’s The Awakening, Edna’s final swim in the ocean can easily be interpreted as a suicide.

Here we find a possible representation of the female sublime as theorized by Christine Battersby in The Sublime, Terror, and Human Difference. Unlike Freeman’s feminine sublime, the female sublime focuses specifically on the materiality of the female body and on that body’s ability to coexist with, and even “[embody]” the other within the self (103).
I would like to revisit an idea that I pointed to at the beginning of this study of *Uma aprendizagem* ou *O livro dos prazeres* and *La cresta de Ilión* as representations of their respective protagonists’ journeys of self-discovery—journeys which each protagonist realizes through a relationship with some manifestation of the sublime. Given that the idea of a metaphorical journey constitutes a central structuring theme in both of these novels, it is significant that Ulysses, or Odysseus, is present in each of these texts, and that, from the time of *Uma aprendizagem*’s publication (1969) to that of *La cresta de Ilión* (2002), he comes to occupy a very different role. In spite of the fact that Lóri is the central protagonist of *Uma aprendizagem* and that the novel centers around her process of transformation, it is still her male counterpart who bears the name of the epic voyager, and he who is the captain of their joint venture. Conversely, in the conclusion of *La cresta*, we find the following passage, cited previously in the chapter on Rivera Garza, in which the author establishes a connection between Amparo’s “cresta ilíaca” (“iliac crest”) and Ulysses’s “cresta de Ilión” (“Ilion’s crest”):

> No pude recordar su rostro después. Recordé, en cambio, el nombre del hueso que había despertado mi deseo y mi miedo al mismo tiempo. El hueso ilión [. . .], cuyas alas se extienden a cada lado de la espina dorsal. Al punto anterosuperior de las alas de ilión se le llama la cresta ilíaca. Desde ahí, desde Ilión, desde su cresta, Ulises partió de regreso a Ítaca después de la Guerra. (173)

> Afterwards I couldn’t remember her face. Instead, I remembered the name of the bone that had awakened my desire and, at the same time, my fear. The ilium [. . .], whose wings extend on either side of the dorsal spine. The anterosuperior point of the
wings of the ilium is called the iliac crest. It was from there, from Ilion, from its crest, that Ulysses left to return to Ithaca after the War. (my translation)

If, given this passage, we are meant to identify the novel’s protagonist with Ulysses and take Amparo’s “cresta iliaca” as the point of departure for his return voyage, the odyssey that the protagonist of La cresta realizes through a relationship with the sublime consists of his coming home to the idea that he is, or could be, a woman. As such, his journey of self-discovery represents not only an eternal return, but also a radical reconfiguration, by the end of which our protagonist, unlike the mythical Ulysses, is recognizable to all the Emissaries as in some way like them.

Having established the presence of the feminine sublime in Uma aprendizagem and La cresta de Ilión, the general question of its presence in modern and contemporary Latin American writing arises, and, more specifically, the question of its presence in the writing of modern and contemporary Latin American women writing on the theme self-discovery. At this point I have delineated the presence of the feminine sublime in the above novels of Clarice Lispector and Cristina Rivera Garza, but it remains to assess the extent to which the feminine sublime enters into others of their works, and into the works of other modern and contemporary Latin American women writers. In such a study, one would be interested in finding whether or not the sublime figures, not only in the content of their writing, but also in their respective methodologies or writing styles. An exploration of the creative process itself would be necessary to clarify if one of the objectives of these authors in writing such elusive texts was to produce a state of sublimity in the reader that would approximate the experience of the protagonist on his or her voyage of self-unveiling. If so, the feminine sublime could serve as a potential heuristic for the works of modern and contemporary Latin American
women writers, such as María Luisa Bombal or Alejandra Pizarnik, whose texts are often labeled as cryptic and difficult to decipher.

In a study of the sublime in modern and contemporary Latin American fiction, one would also need to consider not only Barbara Claire Freeman’s elaboration of the feminine sublime, but also Christine Battersby’s theory of the female sublime, and even the differently formulated feminine sublime of Patricia Yaeger—asking to what extent the generative female body is involved in women’s voyages of self-discovery, and whether it can be said to constitute a sublime presence within recent Latin American women’s fiction. Also under consideration should be the question of how the sublimity of the female body has been formulated differently over time and in various women’s works: to what extent it has been figured as a site of sublime terror and, alternately, as a site of sublime dispossession, self-discovery, or radical coexistence.

Finally, such a study would investigate whether the sublime is involved in novels that depict a process of making strange, as seen in Rivera Garza’s La cresta de Ilión. By conducting such a study of the sublime in modern and contemporary Latin American literature, one would not only introduce a set of critical concepts that could help to further our understanding of modern and contemporary Latin American fiction, but, by analyzing the diverse manifestations of the sublime in a variety of Latin American literary texts, one would also contribute further innovations to the age-old theory of the sublime. Or, to put it differently, by analyzing the diverse manifestations of the feminine sublime within modern and contemporary Latin American literature, would further elucidate the extent to which its presence constitutes both a radical reconfiguration and, at the same time, an eternal return.
WORKS CITED


