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Knowing Self, Knowing Other: Aesthetics in the Grass Is Singing

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In *The Grass is Singing*, by Doris Lessing, we return to the original meaning of the Greek *aestheta*, "things perceptible by the senses," as well as to the original meaning of the Greek aesthete as "one who perceives." By 1750, when A. T. Baumgarten published *Aesthetica*, aesthetics had become a philosophy of the beautiful and a theory of taste, while an aesthete had become one "who pursues and is devoted to the 'beautiful' in art" (11). However, in reducing temporality to the present and to the body through the sudden appearance of the sublime, Lessing's narrative brings us back to the first meaning of aesthetics.¹ In this post-colonial narrative, Lessing breaks new ground in the territory of black and white relations as they were played out within the apartheid government of South Africa. Specifically, *The Grass is Singing* provides us with a useful test site for the concept of an aesthetics of the *unseen* as well as the idea of *cognition and ethics* through and of the senses through its portrayal of the intense clash between black and white. From a purely political point of view, Lessing skillfully narrows the field of battle from an entire country to one man and one woman in order to expose the corruption of apartheid. On the level of aesthetic cognition, what is "unseen" by Mary Turner—the very personhood of Moses, her native house servant—eventually destroys her. As Lessing reduces the temporal construct of the novel to Mary's present and to Mary's body, she introduces Moses as the embodiment of the aesthetic sublime; as such, he is "perceptible [only] through the senses." The kind of cognitive aesthetics revealed in this novel insists that we not only account for the other, but that we know the other as ourselves—fully human. In exploring the idea of instinctual, sense-cognition, perhaps we

¹ For the inspiration and development of this idea I am deeply indebted to Karl Heinz Bohrer, Frederic Jameson, and Susan Buck-Morss.

might begin to understand how we can know the Other, how we can learn of each other and process that knowledge to our mutual global benefit.

Although defining terms such as aesthetic, sublime, and suddenness may present certain problems, I intend to stipulate my understanding of these concepts as they apply to a particular interpretation of Lessing's narrative. In addition, while it may seem counterintuitive to say in one breath that in this novel the concept of aesthetics returns us to the original meaning, while in the next breath to put forth a definition of the sublime as conceived by the likes of Burke and Kant, this circuitous route of explanation will demonstrate that "things as perceived by the senses" is the dominant cognitive mode of the novel. In defining *the sublime*, I have consulted the ideas of various philosophers such as Kant, Burke, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Schlegel, Marx and Benjamin. In defining *the sudden*, I have found Karl Heinz Bohrer to be invaluable, and I have also consulted Edmund Burke. Not all of these philosophies will seem to be compatible with each other. However, in creating my argument concerning the sudden appearance of the sublime in Lessing's narrative, I found it enlightening to take them all into account. After all, it is not a philosophy I am trying to establish, but a reading of a particular aspect of one narrative. We can define our terms as follows:

1) By *the sublime*, I intend the meaning of the term as put forth by Edmund Burke primarily, although I also build on the meaning of sublime, as demonstrated in Lessing's novel, explained by Kant, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer. Burke has said that the sublime is that which fills the mind of the subject completely, compels rather than seduces, thereby wielding absolute sway over the subject (36, 53). The subject's response to the sublime does not reside in the subject's mind alone, however; the object regarded

as sublime exudes certain qualities, such as strength, will, power, great mass or height, etc., depending upon the object. Burke tells us that "sublime objects are vast in their dimensions. . .rugged and negligent. . .dark and gloomy. . .solid, and even massive" (113).

2) *Suddenness* as defined by Burke is that object or event of such greatness that can make us start with terror; thus, he links the phenomenon of suddenness with the sublime. He states that "whatever either in sights or sounds makes the transition from one extreme to the other easy, causes no terror, and consequently can be no cause of greatness" (76). More recently, In the book *Suddenness: On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance* (1994), Karl Heinz Bohrer weds the sudden to the sublime as well, arguing that suddenness represents the concept in modern art of the subversive, anti-transitional moment that refuses to be absorbed into surrounding contextual history. In this argument, he includes a history of the sublime, as seen by Nietzsche primarily, in which the sublime and the incomprehensible are equated (85). The sublime can thus be seen as a type of the sudden appearance of the aesthetic moment, most powerful because of its disruptive power. In order for the impact of the sudden appearance of the sublime to be felt, says Bohrer, "a sudden change of consciousness is needed" (83). He further explains that "the sudden appearance" can be understood in art as "the dissimilar, the always new motivation" (88). This way of looking at art describes its effects on us, as well as indicates its function as "boundary, its delimiting role in regard to life and reality" (88). But what happens if that appearance thrusts outwards past the boundaries of art and becomes a reality? No categories would be sufficient to define or describe such a phenomenon.

In the novel, then, the phenomenon called the sudden appearance of the sublime reveals itself in three ways. First of all, the body, particularly that of Mary Turner, through whose eyes we see the unfolding of the events before the murder, occupies the primary position in the novel--the discomfort of the body in extreme temperatures; the heightened sense awareness; the need for the body to feel safe and sheltered. The feelings, which we may call the senses of the body, locate all of her thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. For Mary, isolated from her neighbors, even from her own husband, there is nothing else--no time, no space--just the body and the present. She has no hope in a future and she cannot regain her past. All she has is the now. As Frederic Jameson has pointed out, "The end of temporality is that this existential time shrinks down to the present. The future and the past are forgotten dimensions" (Public Lecture, July 2, 2001). Secondly, the aesthetic recuperated by this narrative is the sublime, particularly embodied in Moses, whose height, muscular bulk, his strength, and even dark coloring conform to the definition of the sublime as given by Burke and Kant. Thirdly, this sublime is constituted by a rare and dangerous appearance that brings sudden, violent and irrevocable change. In the world of the novel, which becomes more and more synonymous with Mary's world, bounded by her body, her space and her time (the present), the sudden appearance of the sublime is revealed in four moments: 1) Mary whips Moses across the face with the *sjambok* ("involuntarily. . .she did not know what she was doing"), and Moses responds in surprise, but calmly stands his ground; 2) Mary sees Moses bathing himself, feeling anger at his body "expressing his resentment of her presence there"; 3) Moses leads Mary into her bedroom and places her on the bed after she suffers a breakdown in his presence, and 4) Moses strikes Mary down after her

betrayal of him. In this murder, Moses acts more as a force of nature than as a human being, as a "shape" coming suddenly out of the darkness, as the very lightning leaping out of the dark clouds. As his knife comes down and plunges into her body, she loses all conscious thought and is reduced to a body feeling in a sudden act of violent change.

Before proceeding any further, however, one additional stipulation must be made. The sudden appearance of the sublime must be differentiated from the epiphany made famous by James Joyce. In *Stephen Hero*, we learn that an epiphany is a "sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself" (215). The most famous scene in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is, of course, the epiphany Stephen has upon seeing the girl at the seashore.

He was alone. . . .A girl stood before him in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to sea. She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird. . . .--Heavenly God! cried Stephen's soul, in an outburst of profane joy. He turned away from her suddenly and set off across the strand. His cheeks were aflame; his body was aglow; his limbs were trembling. On and on and on and on he strode, far out over the sands, singing wildly to the sea, crying to greet the advent of the life that had cried to him. Her image had passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! (171-172).

Stephen is struck dumbfounded, and then is exuberant, uplifted and confident. His artistic awareness has been awakened, and he knows, suddenly, his purpose in life. He is

momentarily transported beyond the confines of time and space, and inhabits a world in which only he and the girl exist. Isolated, silent, dumbstruck, Stephen has been transformed forever by his powerful encounter with the beautiful.

In some ways, then, the epiphany and the sudden appearance of the sublime are similar: both occur within a moment, both often occur in silence, and both leave the subject (the participant in the moment) momentarily astonished, speechless or awed. However, unlike the epiphany--a spiritual manifestation of a physical encounter with the beautiful-- the sudden appearance of the sublime is not necessarily an uplifting experience. Kant says that we can encounter the sublime in the form of a snow-capped mountain, or a great height; but it can also be a great depth, and it can--and most often does--inspire fear in the beholder. The sudden appearance of the sublime does not so much transport the subject of contemplation/confrontation to a place above or beyond space and time as it suspends the subject in a moment of terror. The subject is brought back into her own body, suddenly aware of her boundaries, of her smallness in the presence of the sublime. She may be confused and disoriented. She is "knocked for a loop," so to speak, and she lands squarely back into her Self. The subject who encounters the sublime does not feel inspired or transformed. On the contrary, tension, agitation, even hostility may follow this encounter because the subject has encountered the unknown. The subject faced with the sublime does not know what to make of it, although she may be completely fascinated. In a confrontation with the sublime, the subject is faced with the unfamiliar which is thrust suddenly into the familiar, without benefit of previous knowledge to help her assimilate it into her experience. Unlike one who experiences an epiphany, one who is arrested by the appearance of the sublime has

no enlightening vision of the future. On the contrary, cognition, in the way most familiar to her, is suspended--all is reduced to the present and the body. The after effects of such a confrontation linger in the form of continued dissociation from reality, an inability to focus on anything but on the sublime. The future ceases to exist. The past has no meaning. The subject is terrified of being in the presence of the sublime, but is equally fearful of being away from it. This simultaneous attraction/repulsion is one of the hallmarks of the encounter with the sublime. The cognition of this encounter is irreducible to thought or language. It leaves the subject in confusion as to her own identity apart from the sublime, and numb to what came before.

The moment in which we witness the character struck dumbfounded by the sudden appearance of the sublime in the narrative work of art is actually comprised of an accumulation of various factors. In such a narrative, the appearance of the sublime has been carefully prepared for in the character's mind, as well as in the mind of the reader. Eight components to this appearance are revealed in *The Grass is Singing*. Except for the first and last of these components, the elements listed here do not represent separate stages of the experience of the sublime; rather, they represent the types of experience the character feels in the presence of the sublime. For instance, Mary Turner alternately feels fear, confusion, tension, and numbness; she does not clearly proceed from one extreme feeling or experience to the next, although she may feel more fearful as a result of isolation, and so forth. These components are: 1) the disruption of the continuity of personal history; 2) the onset of isolation and the creation of a private sphere of experience; 3) the fear generated by isolation; 4) the immersion into darkness, both physical and spiritual, and the longing for light that results; 5) the phenomenon of being

stretched beyond the limits between two poles of understanding, and the numbness of mind that results from such intense stress; 6) the confusion of reality and dreams, and the madness that results from such confusion; 7) the sudden appearance of the sublime, and the undeniable, inescapable power of the sublime over the subject; and 8) the cognitive backlash of the aesthetic which results from the subject's encounter with the sublime. I use the word "backlash" because the cognitive element of this encounter with the sublime is not something palpable which the subject learns from the encounter. Rather, the encounter simply happens and the truth of the event resides in the body and in the present only. What the subject "learns," then, takes the form of a backlash, created by her attempt to assimilate something from the event because disruption must be closed; the rip that the sublime opens up must be sewn back into the fabric of experience. The very nature of the sublime denies the desired assimilation, however, which leaves the subject full of only the sublime, emptied of self. In *The Grass is Singing*, we see a woman stupefied by her encounter with the sublime, attempting to assimilate the experience, and yet not understanding even at the moment she takes her dying breath; if she knows this secret, she dies without revealing it.

As explained earlier, an encounter with the sublime does not often have an uplifting effect on the subject. According to Edmund Burke, the source of the sublime (in the figurative manner in which we encounter it in the work of art--including narrative), is the combination of events or objects which "excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever in in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror" (36). We may read of Mary's encounter with Moses, experiencing vicariously all of the fear, the attraction, the

confusion, and ultimately the terror of dissolution at the hands of the sublime. However, for Mary, this terror is anything but figurative, which brings us back to the idea that appearance is a "function of its boundary" (Bohrer 88). Moses's emergence in her life is the culmination of all of her fears: of the natives of South Africa, of bodily functions, especially of sexual intimacy. Furthermore, the sublime in Burke is, according to Eagleton, "beauty's point of inner fracture, a negation of settled order without which any order would grow inert and wither" (54). If we include this definition of the sublime as it appears in *The Grass is Singing*, then we may go a step further and see that this appearance serves to disrupt the status quo, a point on which I will elaborate later.

The source of the sublime, Burke continues, is that which is "productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (36). In *The Grass is Singing*, the source of the sublime is Moses. Bohrer has further characterized the sudden as "an expression and a sign of discontinuity and nonidentity, as whatever resists aesthetic integration" (vii). In Mary's world, Moses becomes the epitome of "discontinuity and nonidentity." His appearance as the sublime marks in her a "sudden change of consciousness" (Bohrer 83) whereby she unwillingly discovers what has been hidden within herself, a secret so totally dark that its unveiling to her consciousness drives her mad. She senses a deep, cognitive moment through the sudden appearance of the sublime. This sense-cognition emerges from the aesthetic realm, which eventually brings us back to the original meaning of the word "aesthetic"--"as related to the senses."

Two kinds of historical continuity are disrupted by the sudden appearance of the sublime in *The Grass is Singing*, political and personal. Of these two types, the continuity of personal history reverberates most deeply. Mary and Dick Turner, Tony Marston,

Charles and Margaret Slatter, and Moses, enact their roles against the backdrop of a most crucial time in the history of South African apartheid. We are moved, not by the political themes that underlie this story, but by Mary's encounter with the sublime, by the intensely personal nature of her encounter--it is a leveling event, a life-altering event, and we feel it down to our toes. The continuity of history in South Africa revolved around maintaining the illusion of white superiority and the strictures of apartheid. Although Mary had grown up within a strict code of conduct of the white community, when she moves to the farm, she refuses to become a part of the white settlers' society and therefore remains ignorant of their rules. In her isolation, she breaks the pattern of white and black relations which finds its culmination in her murder.

Lessing has structured the novel along the lines of a murder mystery, although we know the identity of the murderer from the beginning. She begins the story in the hours after the murder and then retraces the events leading up to it in Chapters Two through Eleven. From this perspective, we more clearly see the way in which the murder has disrupted the rhythm of the apartheid system itself, as well as the day to day rhythms of the farmers and the natives. The white settlers had been accustomed to the pattern of black-white relationships over a period of many years. As Tony Marsten (the new farm intern) discovers, their attitude was that the newcomer must either learn the rules and codes they had established, or else leave the country altogether. Any other attitude would have been unacceptable (11). Tony serves as the translator of events in the first chapter. We see through his eyes the magnitude of the murder, and that instead of feeling hatred and anger towards Moses, the murderer, that the police and Charlie Slatter (supposedly speaking for the white settlers) hate Mary instead. The murder is seen as her fault: she

had broken the rules. Tony, however, feels that the murder must be understood against the backdrop of the "pattern of their lives" (18). When the police question him as to how Mary had treated "her boys," Tony becomes angry, "fumbling for a foothold in this welter of emotion and half understood loyalties" (18). He concludes that, although "a monstrous injustice was being done," (22) in the long run it will make no difference to understand the history and the circumstances after all, no difference to Moses at any rate. The pattern of black and white relations had been disrupted, but the pattern of political life would continue as usual. "Did he intend to go on fighting in the dark for the sake of a principle?" (22). Finally, it is only on the personal level, not on the political or ideological level, that the encounter with the sublime is even a possibility. It is an event not looked for, but anticipated, not assimilated, but destructive and debilitating, not repeatable, but once in a lifetime, not desired, but dreaded.

In the present study, the continuity of the political is mostly bracketed in favor of a personal, aesthetic continuity, although making the link between the political and the aesthetic is difficult to avoid. In her first novel, Doris Lessing calls the attention of the world to bear on the horrors of apartheid. It is in part thanks to her that this system has come under such close scrutiny in the latter part of the 20th century. By taking a moment such as this one--the moment of personal upheaval in the lives of at least two people, Moses and Mary--Lessing successfully politicizes the aesthetic. In the tradition of the historical materialism of Walter Benjamin, Mary's murder blasts apart the status quo. In his *Sixteenth Thesis on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin states that the "historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop" (262). If we apply Benjamin's concept to

our understanding of the sudden appearance of the sublime as I have set forth here, the encounter with the sublime is also characterized by the suspension of time: *things-as-they-have-always-been* is forever disrupted and the rhythms of life come to screeching halt. The sense of the aesthetic that operates in Lessing's novel lies in its expression of the terror and horror of encountering the sublime and of the leveling effect this event has on all involved.

The regular patterns of life, the continuity of time which lulls us into its safe rhythms seems a precondition of the violent encounter with the sublime. Up until the point at which Mary's friends seem to turn on her and discuss her inability to find a husband and settle down, leading Mary to quickly take Dick as her husband and move to the farm, Mary's life had run in a predictable pattern. She had enjoyed the undisturbed rhythms of her life: "She liked things to happen safely one after another in a pattern, and she liked, particularly, the friendly impersonality of it" (Lessing 32). Even as a child, Mary's life had held few surprises. She regards the deaths of her older siblings as a convenience--with them gone, the arguments in her home came to an end. These siblings had been merely obstacles to an even more predictable and safe life. The only other obstacle that had stood in the way of her prosaic happiness was her father, a man with whom she had shared little or no affection. "Till she was twenty-five nothing happened to break the smooth and comfortable life she led. . . .She was free!" (33).

As a single woman working in an office in her little town, Mary's life had fallen into the pattern of a happy and carefree life. She had lived in a dormitory-like home for single women; the longer she remained single, the more of a mother figure she became

for the other girls in the dorm. They had confided in her all of their secrets. She had listened to their stories and given advice. She also had enjoyed the company of many men friends, for although she had had a fear of sexual intimacy (a fear engendered by the sights and sounds she had endured as a child), she was never without an escort because it was expected of those in her social class. Year after year, Mary remained in the dormitory while other girls would leave and get married. It had never occurred to Mary that she was regarded as an oddity. One evening, however, she overhears a few of her friends discussing her unmarried state as if she were a community joke. Immediately, the comfortable rhythm of her life bumps to a halt. She "had lost her poise" (40). She feels unable to "recreate herself" (42) after this image of herself has been destroyed. She begins to seek refuge from her confusion at the theater, going to see films that had once made her happy, but "there seemed no connection between the distorted mirror of the screen and her own life; it was impossible to fit together what she wanted for herself, and what she was offered" (42 - 43). She has lost her comfortable context and, as Bohrer points out, with regard to the sudden, she is like one who is confronted by "a piece of reality . . . that has not yet been authenticated by a moral or intellectual code" (71). Mary is lost for the first time in her life, and marriage to Dick Turner seems the answer to her problems. Marriage will allow Mary to hide "behind the mask of violated convention" (Bohrer 71) and pretend that her life has returned to a sense of normalcy. Mary must believe, in other words, that Dick will help to restore balance and rhythm to her life, recreating that comfortable context.

Mary successfully isolates herself from her neighbors when she moves to the farm with Dick. Before Dick married Mary, he and Charlie Slatter had been at the very least

"acquaintances." Although Slatter had always had his eye on Dick's farm and generally thought Dick a fool who wasted his time and energy on little crops, he felt somewhat protective of him and did not necessarily want to see him fail. However, after the marriage, the relationship between the two men changes. Mary refuses to understand that she is expected to become a part of the white society, to live within a certain code of behavior. She feels a sort of wounded pride in the conditions in which they live--a tin roofed house with small amenities such as she could provide on Dick's meager income--and a need to be self-sufficient and independent. The other women, in particular Margaret Slatter, do not understand her behavior. In all, the white community dislike the Turners because they "kept to themselves"; that was all" (2). The people with whom they were to have associated "spoke of the Turners in the hard, careless voices reserved for misfits, outlaws and the self-exiled" (2). This isolation from the world around her places Mary in a peculiar position to be accosted by the sublime. As she loses touch with her neighbors, she loses touch with reality. Tony Marston thinks to himself that Mary is mad:

She behaves simply as if she lives in a world of her own, where other people's standards don't count. She has forgotten what her own people are like. But then, what is madness, but a refuge, a retreating from the world?
(215)

Mary had seemingly "shut out everything that conflicted with her actions, that would revive the code she had been brought up to follow" (215). By the end of the novel, the only other person who inhabits her world is Moses. Only he has the power to move her in any way. She is completely under his spell. By the time Mary's death is immanent,

she has become so isolated that even the touch of her husband's hand does not register a response: "But he was a long way off, he did not matter to her: he was like a person on the other side of a thick glass wall" (234).

A sense that time has no meaning pervades the encounter with the sublime. As Bohrer states, the truth is in the moment: "there is no causality, no correctness, no expression, but at most an aesthetic attitude" (138). Mary sleeps away hours at a time as away to "make time pass quickly" (106). With the onset of Dick's second bout with malaria, Mary finds herself in the same house, often in the same room, with Moses for hours at a time. As the days unfold, she feels that "time passes quickly, rushing upwards, as it does in those periods when the various crises that develop and ripen in each life show like hills at the end of a journey, setting a boundary to an era" (145). She is powerless in Moses' presence and eventually loses "all sense of time" (180). According to Bohrer, "the sudden is thus not simply a category for the phenomenality of the work of art in consideration of its aesthetic effect; it also marks the barrier against a concept of time distorted by the history of philosophy or a theoretical system" (x). In the grip of the sudden appearance of the sublime and under the power of the sublime to lull her into a state of semi-consciousness, Mary's concept of time becomes distorted. Time as a pattern of continuous events leading to a specific goal no longer has any meaning for her. She begins to feel as if her life is a repetition of her mother's life, that the events are circular and meaningless. Near the end of her life, Mary senses the familiarity of her hopeless situation. Just as she had looked to Dick to save her from the cruelty of her friends, she looks to Tony to save her from Moses.

And then, she had felt this emptiness when, at last, she had known there was to be no release and that she would live on the farm till she died.

There was nothing new even in her death; all this was familiar, even her feeling of helplessness" (231).

Her realization does not undercut the power of the sublime, or the suddenness of its appearance in her life in the form of Moses. On the contrary, it is prerequisite to the encounter. With no meaning in the past to provide stability and no hope in a future, Mary falls into an ideal situation for her encounter with Moses.

The fear that is the result of her isolation takes many forms, especially, however, her fear of the natives, the bush, and sexual intimacy. Mary is generally fearful of the unknown, and when she marries Dick and goes with him to the farm, the unknown surrounds her. Although she had grown up on a farm, she had taken no interest in it, nor any responsibility for its upkeep, and therefore remained fairly detached from her surroundings. However, after her marriage, she realizes that she and Dick alone would be responsible for all that happened in their lives, that life on this farm would be filled with a great many unknowns. Bohrer tells us that "the unknown--the word if not the experience--hides a mythic remnant that reason cannot dissolve" (70). Although Mary had held a job in town and had considered herself capable of getting along in the world, the veld, the bush and the farm present her with a new kind of challenge, one she cannot master. When it appears, the unknown causes fear "even hostility," Bohrer says, "precisely because it was unexpected" (70).

From the time she was a child, Mary had been warned not to go out walking alone because the natives "were nasty and might do horrible things to her" (Lessing 60). She

had never had much contact with natives before going to live on the farm. Therefore, when she is faced with working alongside a house servant, she does not know how to behave. She drives Dick's house servant of many years, Samson, back to the *kraal* with her suspicions that he is stealing from them. She cannot understand his and Dick's relationship at all. She cannot keep house servants because she nags at them and complains about their work habits. She does not know that the natives had been taught not to look directly into the eyes of their mistresses. She even hates the native women, "the exposed fleshiness of them, their soft brown bodies and soft bashful faces that were also insolent and inquisitive, and their chattering voices that held a brazen fleshy undertone" (104).

Not only was she fearful of the natives, but of their land, as well. The bush surrounding the farm became a specific source of fear for Mary from the moment she arrives at the farm. "Listening in the complete silence, innumerable little noises rose from the bush, as if colonies of strange creatures had become still and watchful at the coming and were now going about their own business" (52-53). Once she wanders towards the trees seeking shelter, however, "a strange bird called, a wild nocturnal sound, and she turned and ran back, suddenly terrified, as if a hostile breath had blown upon her, from another world, from the trees" (53). Even after having lived on the farm for a few months, Mary remains afraid to walk into the bush, even for the relief of a little shade in the hot months (Lessing 115). She never becomes accustomed to the sight of it, nor of the sounds of the strange animals and birds (183). Perhaps worst of all she never overcomes her fear that "the small brick house, like a frail shell . . . might crush inwards under the presence of the hostile bush" (183). Edmund Burke says that "no passion so

effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear" (53). Mary's ability to think clearly and rationally gradually fades the longer she stays on the farm, living in fear of the natives, of the bush--of the unknown.

Mary also fears her own bodily sensations, a fear that is exacerbated by the extreme weather conditions of the farm. Heat soon becomes an antagonist in her daily struggle for survival.

It was so hot! She had never imagined it could be so hot. The sweat poured off her all day; she could feel it running down her ribs and thighs under her dress, as if ants were crawling over her. She used to sit quite, quite still, her eyes closed, and feel the heat beating down from the iron over her head. (69)

What had seemed a challenge to her sense of adventure became daily more and more of an impossibility: "And it really seemed to her that she could not stand another morning with the hot sun on her neck. . . .As time passed, the heat became an obsession" (74). All of her senses revolve in a tight circle of the intensity of the heat and her need for immediate relief. "After a while, feeling caged, she went out into the dark outside the house, and walked up and down the path between the borders of white stones which gleamed faintly through the dark, trying to catch a breath of cool air to soothe her hot cheeks" (79). Trapped in this vicious cycle, she "clutched at the cold months as if they were a shield to ward off the dreaded listlessness of the heat that would follow" (115). For his part, Dick could not "understand her fluctuating dependence on the weather, an emotional attitude towards it that was alien to him" (146). Her senses, so long deadened in the town to a regular pattern of town activities, begin to awaken on the farm--to the

pain, the discomfort, as well as to the small comforts that would come with every change of season. The sun continued to be her nemesis throughout her life on the farm: "Lifting her eyes she saw she was standing in the full sun. . . a big red sun, sullen with smoke, like a shining plow disc or a polished plate, ready for plucking" (227).

Perhaps the most debilitating fear for Mary was that of sexual intimacy, a fear that had been engendered in Mary early on in life, from scenes she had heard between her parents--no barriers existed in their home to which Mary's parents could have retired in private. She has only dark and frightening "body memories" of her parent's awkward intimacies. She was especially intimidated and repulsed by her father's presence and his body, forced to bring him home from the local bar night after night. The closeness of his body had repulsed her and planted in her a seed of the fear of her own body as well. These fears come together in the body and presence of Moses, ironically enough, not from her own husband, whom she can control with a word or a look. Theirs was an embattled relationship--he trying to understand her, she trying to get him to listen to her advice about the farm. After a few years, Mary is left feeling hopeless. And then, Dick contracts malaria, not once, but twice.

Dick's illness leaves him unable to work in the fields, so Mary must work in his place. Until that time, Mary had thought of the fields as some "strange and alien world," in which Dick was surrounded by "the reeking bodies of the working natives" (73). She reluctantly goes to the *kraal* to order them back to work and notices that the huts, "closely clustered over an acre or two of ground" . . . "looked like natural growths from the ground, rather than man-made dwellings" (121). The earthiness of their dwellings appalls her: "It was as though a giant black hand had reached down from the sky, picked

up a handful of sticks and grass, and dropped them magically on the earth in the form of huts" (121). Her aesthetic sensibilities are being built again, from the ground up, having had no previous experience by which to categorize these new sights, sounds and smells. Although the sight and smells of the natives repulse her, she begins to oversee the them:

As the long afternoon passed, she watched, in a kind of alert stupor, the naked brown backs bend, steady and straighten, the ropes of muscle sliding under the dusty skin. . . .nearly all were naked about the waist.

(124)

The heat, her most dreaded enemy, is forgotten as she "watched the dark hands stripping cobs, . . .and thought of nothing else" (125). Already, her world is reduced to what is happening to her at the moment, to her body and to the bodies that surround her. She becomes accustomed to the rhythms of her work and her power over the natives. The stage is being set for the appearance of the sublime--out of the continuity of a rhythmic pattern will erupt a sudden change.

When Moses refuses to return to his work after one minute of rest and instead reaches for a drink of water, Mary, enraged by his "cheekiness" and afraid that the other workers will also rebel, whips him across the face with the *sjambok* "in a vicious swinging blow" (134). The narrator tells us that she "stood quite still, trembling" and that she "looked down at the whip. . .as if the whip had swung out of its own accord, without her willing it" (134). Moses, too, is shocked by her action and "put his hand, dazedly to his face" (134). The actions and reactions of Mary and Moses are characteristic of the appearance of the sublime. Burke tells us that

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. (53)

As Mary sees the effect of her blow on Moses, she is immobilized: "He was a great hulk of a man. . .magnificently built, with nothing on but an old sack tied round his waist" (134). He seems to "tower over her" (134). Burke tells us that in this moment, "the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it" (53). Two things here must be emphasized in our understanding of the sublime and its sudden appearance, and its subsequent power over Mary: the mind is "filled with its object" and the mind cannot "reason on that object." Mary is in awe of Moses: "Then she saw him make a sudden movement, and recoiled, terrified; she thought he was going to attack her. But he only wiped the blood off his face with a big hand that shook a little" (134). From this point forward, Moses, as the source of the sublime through this sudden and seemingly involuntary act of Mary's, has power over her. Burke again, can elucidate the significance of this moment: "Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings and hurries us on by an irresistible force" (53). She is ever after to be controlled by her dual attraction/ repulsion to/away from Moses.

Significantly, in striking Moses, Mary enacts a moment of pain in which Moses becomes a human being to her. This is not the first instance of the need for human contact for Mary, even if it were brought to her from a moment of pain. Mary seems to

be at her most self-aware when in pain, for instance when acknowledging the pain of being hot, and yet in the intensity of this pain, she dissociates herself from her surroundings through sleep or torpor. Bohrer says, "Pain is the highest index of our self-awareness in its transition to nonbeing" (149), and is, according to Burke, closely associated with the sublime (36). In a peculiar way, pain both reduces the subject to her body and extends the boundaries of her body outwards, allowing her to objectify her feelings. "Like the glance in the mirror, which says 'I' to itself and yet sees another physical entity, pain provides the peculiar experience of literally objectifying the self" (149). Mary becomes enraged when a servant will not meet her eyes; it is as if "he were not really there, only a black body reading to do her bidding" (Lessing 72). She is repelled by the natives, but at the same time, she is lonely for some human contact. "She felt she would like to pick up a plate and throw it in his face so as to make it human and expressive, *even with pain*" (my emphasis 72). Not only would a reaction of pain from the native show his "human and expressive" nature underlying the mask that society required him to wear, but also it would have perhaps initiated some thought or act, even if only to reveal to Mary the pain she was trying to avoid: ". . . pain is a threat that resides in time, which we would prefer to avoid at all costs," says Bohrer (148). For Mary, the painful moment is unavoidable; there is no escape for her, through sleep, through dreams, even through Tony. She and Moses will face each other in that one painful and terrifying moment as the knife plunges down. Even as she loses consciousness, she attains the knowledge which had evaded her throughout her life--knowledge of Self and Other. At the moment Mary inflicts this pain on Moses, their eyes meet and a knowledge of body,

of blood, of an intimate physical relation, passes between them. As Bohrer notes, "some thinkers have considered pain an initiatory motive for acting and thinking" (148).

As an element of the sublime, darkness is closely linked with the fear of the unknown and a lack of rational thought and understanding. Burke tells us that darkness is the ultimate fear:

. . .for in utter darkness, it is impossible to know in what degree of safety we stand; we are ignorant of the objects that surround us; we may every moment strike against some dangerous obstruction; we may fall down a precipice the first step we take; and if an enemy approach, we know not in what quarter to defend ourselves; in such a case strength is no sure protection; wisdom can only act by guess; the boldest are staggered, and he who would pray for nothing else towards his defense, is forced to pray for light. (130)

As Mary's energy fades, as she begins to lose hope in the future, we see her sitting on her shabby couch "with the faded chintz curtains flapping above her head, as if she were in a stupor. It seemed that something had finally snapped inside of her, and she would gradually fade and sink into darkness" (151). As the darkness in and around Mary grows, the stage is set for the appearance of the sublime--out of the numbness of her mind will explode a sudden awareness of her self and her total lack in the presence of the sublime.

The darkness that readies us for the appearance of the sublime makes its victim uneasy or fearful. After Mary breaks down into tears in front of Moses and he assumes his first actual control over her, she sits in a semi-darkened room: "She powdered her face, and sat a long time before the mirror, feeling unable to move. She was not thinking,

only afraid, and of what she did not know" (173). The darkness, her immobility, her lack of conscious thought, and her fear of the unknown all mark the encounter with the sublime. She feels "as if she were in a dark tunnel, nearing something final, something she could not visualize, but which waited for her inexorably, inescapably" (Lessing 191). Because of this darkness, Mary is in a constant state of tension, and longs to escape into a state of numbness. Bohrer calls our attention to the tension in modernism between the traditional past and the present, "however it may manifest itself stylistically" (84). What used to make sense, in other words, no longer does; the old meaning is confronted with and subsequently challenged, if not supplanted, by the new. The introduction of the new disrupts the established patterns of the past. The new can be assimilated into what is known; however, with the sublime, this does not occur. Bohrer tells us that the "old unequivocal meaning is replaced by ambiguity, the beauty that merely puts interesting drapery on something already well known is supplanted by a beauty that lets the unknown shimmer through" (84). The tension between past and present, tradition and innovation, the pattern and that which disrupts the pattern, remains unresolved until the very moment that Mary loses consciousness and falls dead to the ground.

When Mary first arrives at the farm, she is challenged, and energetic: "She found the change so embracing that it was as if she were an entirely new person" (63). This feeling of renewed energy soon gives way to a feeling of lethargy once the little house has new curtains and she has no more material on which to embroider. She begins to feel lost and uneasy. Soon, she lapses into a "characteristic pose: sitting quietly, as though waiting for something to wake her into movement" (93). When she thinks that Dick may insist that she go into town to visit old friends, she panics. It "made her feel as if she were raw

all over, her nerves exposed on a shrinking surface" (150). She can no longer concentrate. She becomes restless and is unable to sleep. "And all the time it was as if there were thick cottonwool in her head, and a soft dull pressure on it from outside" (151). She listens with every nerve in her body to everything around her (158).

After Mary loses yet another house servant because of her inability to relate to them properly (as the society of white settlers in South Africa has dictated), Dick brings Moses in as his replacement. At first, Mary resists the idea vehemently, but because she is afraid of making Dick angry, she reluctantly accepts Moses' presence. She cannot, however, treat Moses "as she had treated all the others, for always at the back of her mind, was that moment of fear she had known just after she had hit him and thought he would attack her. She felt uneasy in his presence" (161). Fear acts as both a defense mechanism against the sublime and as an essential aspect of the experience of the sublime. What we do not know, we fear, and yet we are unaccountably drawn to it because of its power over us. Knowledge resides there, we think, and therefore we approach the sublime with fear and trembling.

As Moses continues to work for Mary, her fascination with him grows:

She used to sit quite still, watching him work. The powerful, broad-built body fascinated her. . . His muscles bulged and filled out the thin material of the sleeves until it seemed they would split. (161)

Not only does she watch him work, but also she watches him bathe, a fact of which he is unaware: ". . . from the house she sometimes caught a glimpse of him bending over {a tin of hot water}, sluicing himself, naked from the waist up" (162). The moment in which he becomes aware of her fascination, however, parallels the moment in which she whipped

his face. There can now be no question that Mary has crossed a boundary, from one level of knowledge to another. Previously, she had felt that she was in control, even if that control was tenuous; she had created the "rules of engagement." The personal relation which began when she sees Moses bathing, however, introduces new territory.

One morning. . .she was arrested by the sight of the native under the trees a few yards off. He was rubbing his thick neck with soap, and the white lather was startlingly white against the black skin. He had his back to her. As she looked, he turned, by some chance, or because he sensed her presence, and saw her. (162 - 163)

Bohrer writes that "The nature of appearance as phenomenon is the temporal structure of its suddenness and is indicated by the repeated expressions relating to the concepts of seeing and sight" (118). The importance of the appearance lies not in "the submission of the seeing subject in the contemplation of eternal ideas of essences, but the predominance of what is actually perceived at the moment" (118). Mary does not become one with Moses in some sort of transcendental epiphany. She is "arrested" by the sight of him and thinks only in the moment of what she is seeing and can barely turn her eyes away.

Many aspects of this incident call our attention of the elements of an encounter with the sublime. Kant tells us that the "mien of a man who is undergoing the full feeling of the sublime is earnest, sometimes rigid and astonished" (47). The momentary perception, in which Mary is suddenly "arrested" by the sight of Moses bathing himself is undeniably a moment of sublime appearance. Kant further states that "dark coloring and black eyes are more closely related to the sublime" (54). She is struck dumb, as she was in the moments before and after she struck Moses' face with the *sjambok*. Nietzsche's

concept of the sublime, originally described by Schopenhauer, reveals that the " 'principle of sufficient reason' suffers an 'exception' when the human being is 'suddenly dumbfounded by the cognitive form of phenomena' "(Bohrer 40). Mary has no response to such a sight. She has been assaulted, as it were, and again, a profound change occurs in their relationship. Aesthetic knowledge has passed between them. He senses her presence there, just as later on, when Mary anticipates her death, she senses Moses' presence in the bush. This bodily awareness further reveals the fact that Mary has been reduced to her body; its sensations alone have significance for her. In the encounter with the sublime, Kant notes, "it does not matter so much what the understanding comprehends, but what the feeling senses" (72).

The tension of working so closely beside Moses becomes unbearable, building to the point that she mutters angrily to herself, unaware it is herself that she hears, and when she does become aware of it, she is afraid. She sits "rigid with an hysterical emotion," afraid to move. Mary feels she is being stretched "between two immovable weights" like a "taut-drawn thread." She feels "poised, a battleground for two contending forces" (169), "fighting against something she did not understand" (191). Three elements raise this experience above the commonplace and to the level of the sublime: their sudden and discontinuous nature, the fact that they occur between a woman and her servant, and the fact that they occur between a white woman and an African man. Historical continuity demands that we remain in our designated places; that we continue to live our lives in the accustomed rhythms, that we keep in step with those around us, that we do not isolate ourselves or leave ourselves open to any kind of special dispensation of knowledge or experience. In this sense, historical continuity is equated with the mediocre--things

should stay the same; change is bad. This theory of historical continuity, however, completely discounts those aesthetic moments which must occur in order to propel us into new directions of philosophy and action, but which remain, nonetheless, unexpected and a constant surprise.

Mary longs to escape the tension and retreat into a state of mindless thought, a numb state of mind in which she can finally relax. Before her death, Dick struggles to hang onto her, to keep her from going over the edge, but he is outside of her world by this time, a world that only she and Moses inhabit. The morning of her last day on earth, she sits in bed, feeling at peace, unthinking, simply basking in the quiet, when Dick awakes. She feels frustrated by this interruption, saying of him that he is a "torturing reminder of what she had to forget in order to remain herself" (220). Again, she feels the tension, "that feeling of strain, as if she were stretched taut between two immovable poles" (220). She longs to escape, "to sink back into that region of her mind where Dick did not exist" (220). Dick did not matter any longer. The choice had been made "between Dick and the other, and Dick was destroyed long ago" (220). The choice, however, had never been hers. Her encounter with the sublime had made the choice nonexistent. From the moment she had whipped Moses across the face, she was under the power of the sublime.

Not long after the whipping incident and the subsequent addition of Moses as the house servant, Mary's nerves begin to suffer tremendous strain. Even before this, she had begun to suffer under the strain of living in the small house year after year with no hope of improving her lot. Isolation and loneliness had certainly played their roles in Mary's disintegration. The weight that tips the scales forever off balance, however, is her experience of the sublime:

Impelled by a violent nervous reaction she went to the kitchen, where he stood in clean clothes, putting away his washing things. Remembering the thick black neck with the lather frothing whitely on it, the powerful back stooping over the bucket, was like a goad to her. (163-164)

Mary had no inkling that she was to be confronted with a moment which would forever change her life and the lives of those around her, and not for the better.

What had happened was that the formal pattern of black-and-white, mistress-and servant, had been broken by the personal relation; and when a white man in Africa by accident looks into the eyes of a native and sees the human being (which it is his chief preoccupation to avoid), his sense of guilt, which he denies, fumes up in resentment and he brings down the whip. (164)

Bohrer explains that, "the concept of the sudden. . .centers the experience of the moment outside of reflected history in the most radical way....Suddenness establishes that pointlike quality which allows us to conceptualize the new, the entirely other of the cultural alternative in a purely static way, to disregard the course of time that is a necessary part of our consciousness" (120). Mary has lost her balance. She no longer knows what her role is or how to behave. "She had no control over her actions" (Lessing 164).

Returning to Benjamin's sixteenth thesis, we can draw a parallel between the historical materialist's experience with history and the aesthetic experience that Lessing makes possible; we remember that as the historical materialist "has an 'experience' " with history that "is 'unique' and which blows apart its continuum." This moment is not,

according to Benjamin, a moment of transition but rather one in which time comes to a complete stop. It is in this moment that truth resides, and not in any past recollection and recuperative impulse. The moment stands as its own purveyor of knowledge. Such knowledge is not of the mind, then, but of the body, of the "aesthetic"--thus the link with the sudden appearance of the sublime. It is no wonder that Mary is left reeling from her confrontation with the sublime in the body of Moses. Their encounter does not fit into any pattern of her life experience up to that point. She cannot categorize it, but neither can she ignore it. Things-as-they-have-always-been has been forever disrupted. Violent change will be the only result. When we find ourselves out of a familiar context, we become frightened. Bohrer notes that this "happens already in the preparation for aesthetic production whenever a piece of reality becomes visible that has not yet been authenticated by a moral or intellectual code" (71). When Mary's idea of conventional reality is challenged by her confrontation with the sublime, she attempts to hide behind a mask of indifference; she tries to act as she always has, but finds she cannot do so. "The deep shock . . . is then hidden behind the mask of violated convention" (Bohrer 71).

With Moses, she tries to hide her true vulnerability with her usual "cold-voiced and methodical" instructions, but she finds it impossible to ignore what has passed between them:

She was held, helpless, watching his big hands flip those little scones on the tray. And she said nothing. She felt the usual anger rise within her, at the tone he used to her; at the same time she was fascinated, and out of her depth; she did not know what to do with this personal relation. (Lessing 175)

Burke tells us that whatever causes an "unnatural tension" in an individual, whatever precipitates "certain violent emotions of the nerves" must therefore be "a source of the sublime" (121). The intensity of the tension Mary experiences leads to the very opposite of tension, which is a mindless, empty numbness. In the sequence of the encounter with the sublime, the emptiness is pre-requisite to the filling of the mind with the sublime object. Early on, even before her marriage to Dick, she is primed for the intensity of this encounter: ". . .She was hollow inside, empty, and into this emptiness would sweep from nowhere a vast panic, as if there were nothing in the world she could grasp hold of" (42). Her subsequent reaction to stress and tension "was a dulled acquiescence, a numbness, that was almost indifference" (51). This numbness becomes a refuge for her, but a dangerous one. After her failed escape into town, the numbness takes over: "This was the beginning of an inner disintegration in her. It began with this numbness, as if she could no longer feel or fight" (113). This numbness eventually gives way to hopelessness, that nothing would change, that "there would be no future. . .that nothing really mattered after all" (148-158).

The progression from tension to fatigue to complete numbness is swift and leaves Mary open to the power Moses has over her. "Her legs felt, as she walked, that they were too heavy for her. To make a sentence was an overwhelming effort" (159). She longs for complete disintegration into nothingness, anything but the constant tension between Moses, herself and Dick: "she thought of a full complete darkness with longing. Her eyes closed, she imagined that the skies were blank and cold, without even stars to break their blackness" (159). Her mind becomes a "soft aching blank" (169); by the time of her breakdown with Moses, she is "numbed and silent, unable to consider the implications of

the incident" (172). When she thinks of the past, it is "without nostalgia or desire" (180). She becomes apathetic and disinterested in anything but Moses. So far under his control does she slide that she no longer dresses herself or brushes her own hair. She depended totally on him "so that she need not think for herself" (223).

Mary and Moses eventually inhabit a sphere separate from the world around them, a typical element of the aesthetic experience (Bohrer 138), but especially so of the sublime. She was constantly aware of his presence: ". . .her feeling was one of a strong and irrational fear, a deep uneasiness, and even--though this she did not know, would have died rather than acknowledge--of some dark attraction" (176). When Mary strikes Moses, she thrusts herself into the unknown, a realm from which she does not return. Her sojourn into this realm must be solitary, as all aesthetic journeys must be: a one-on-one experience that reverberates to the very core of our being. Bohrer's explanation is that "the category of the moment, of the new, of the unknown, cannot be ignored" because it is phenomenon that is not "derived from anything else" and must be dealt with as its own entity. The encounter with the sublime is in itself the significance, not any extrapolation of truth (Bohrer 91).

In Mary's isolation her fears become greater, and she begins to sleep her days away, dreaming. These dreams, once full of hope in an unknown yet challenging future, become nightmares of despair, populated almost entirely by Moses, the bush, and the unknown. Eventually, she has difficulty distinguishing between dreams and reality. The onset of the worst of these dreams is an intensely personal encounter with Moses when, in her weakness, she allows him to see her as a human being. The tension that had been growing between Mary and Moses causes her to one day break into violent sobs. He

brings her a glass of water, takes her into the bedroom, and pushes her onto the bed insisting that she rest, all the while speaking soothingly to her as if she were a child. Instead of being grateful for this comfort, Mary cringes with disgust at his touch, nauseated and horrified. After she wakes up, she remembers the incident with new fear:

For a moment she could not remember what had happened; but when she did the fear engulfed her again, a terrible dark fear. She thought of herself weeping helplessly, unable to stop; of drinking at that black man's command; of the way he had pushed her across the two rooms to the bed; of the way he had made her lie down and then tucked the coat in round her legs. She shrank into the pillow with loathing, moaning out loud, as if she had been touched by excrement. And through her torment she could hear his voice, firm and kind, like a father commanding her. (173)

At the point, Mary begins to dream of Moses with increasing frequency, and in those dreams, she confuses Moses with her father. According to Bohrer, a violation of the boundaries between the real and the unreal marks the sudden appearance of the aesthetic, in this case, the sublime. "Now she dreamed through her broken nights, horrible, frightening dreams. Her sleep, once an instantaneous dropping of a black curtain, had become more real than her waking" (178). She dreams that he touches her, that he is merely a horrible presence, that he wants something from her, a something which she cannot name, but which she instinctively knows and fears (178). Finally, in her dreams, Moses and her father merge into one, a threatening sexual presence over which she has no power to resist.

He approached slowly, obscene and powerful, and it was not only he, but her father who was threatening her. They advanced together, one person, and she could smell, not the native smell, but the unwashed smell of her father. It filled the room, musty, like animals; and her knees went liquid as her nostrils distended to find clean air and her head became giddy.

(188)

This is a nightmare from which Mary finds it almost impossible to awake, both literally and figuratively. "She screamed, knowing suddenly she was asleep and in nightmare. She screamed and screamed desperately, trying to wake herself from the horror" (189). The dream hangs on, however, even after she has awakened, even after Moses has come into the room with a tray of tea for her; she struggles "to separate dream from reality" and tries to "clear away the fog of horror" (189, 190). As Burke so aptly remarked, the power which arises from terror "is the common stock of everything that is sublime" (59).

The blurring of the line between fantasy and reality often indicates that a person inhabits an environment which has created a deficit in conscious awareness. Mary's environment has been reduced to the walls of her house; her interaction with people is now limited to Moses. Frederich Schlegel has noted that " 'to have fantasy does not mean to think up something, it means to make something of the things around us' "(Bohrer 90). In her attempts to negotiate her way through this new and personal landscape with Moses, Mary creates an alternate world in which the horrors of her childhood have become one with her terror of Moses. After she had whipped him across the face in a show of power, she had expected him to cower in obedience. However, when he faced her down, the balance of power shifted to his side, where it would stay. She knew that

she had no power over him, or any native for that matter. In addition, her fear of sexual intimacy, coupled with her general fear of natives and her isolation with Moses, explodes into paranoid delusions:

Once she was roused by a noise, and realized it was herself, talking out loud in the living room in a low angry voice. In her fantasy, the native had forgotten to clean the bedroomThe sound of that soft, disjointed crazy voice was a terrifying as the sight of herself in the mirror had been. She was afraid, jerked back into herself, shrinking from the vision of herself talking like a mad woman in the corner of the sofa. (170)

The longer she is isolated, the more deeply into madness she descends. Her isolation from reality keeps her in the grip of Moses' power. When Charlie Slatter comes to the house to check on Dick, after not having seen him for a year, he finds Mary drastically changed:

She remained standing uncertainly in front of him, a dried stick of a woman, her hair that had been bleached by the sun into a streaky mess falling round a scrawny face and tied on the top of her head with a blue ribbon. . . .She laughed, twisting her shoulder in a horrible parody of coquetry. (201)

After Tony arrives at the farm, he notes Mary's disturbing behavior and begins to think "she wasn't all there" (210), but then writes that off as tension or strain of living on the farm. It is not until he sees Moses brushing her hair and helping her to dress that he realizes the gravity of her situation, that she had crossed the boundary between fantasy and reality and was hanging on at best by a slender thread.

The power that Moses wields over Mary reveals the power of the sublime. Burke, in his differentiation between the beautiful and the sublime, notes that the sublime demands our attention. Terry Eagleton, in his comments on this idea, uses the comparison between coercive and consensual (54). In the presence of the sublime, the subject can do nothing but obey its commands. The subject becomes meek and dissociated from the force of her own personality. A feeling of dread overwhelms the subject, as pointed out by Kant, even sometimes a feeling of "melancholy" (47). As Moses' proximity to Mary grows closer, his power over her extends to every facet of her life. She is "forced into contact and she never ceased to be aware of him" (177). She is also aware of the danger involved in this relationship, but "what it was she was unable to define" (177). The simultaneous attraction/repulsion fascinates Mary; it is the fascination with the unknown and ultimately, with the sublime. Moses, too, senses the shift in power. Mary "dreaded hearing him speak, because now there was a new tone in his voice: familiar, half-insolent, domineering" (191). Dick recedes further and further into fantasy, while Moses becomes her only reality: "She did not look at Dick when he came in. For days at a time she did not speak to him. It was as if he did not exist for her. She seemed to be sunk fathoms deep in some dream of her own" (206). She is alert only to Moses and his commands. Once under the power of the sublime, Mary has no choice but to obey him. As Nietzsche points out in his explanation of the defining event, "an urge, a pressure governs it, mastering the soul like a command" (Bohrer 6).

Bohrer describes the idea of suddenness as a structural concept, the structure of prose that sets in motion a defense against the cliché or cultural norm: "the sudden or the emphatic. . .arises from the collision of surprise attack and historical-political

development" (16). This concept operates in *The Grass is Singing* on every level: structurally, without a doubt, but also narratively and metaphorically. Mary is first speechless after whipping Moses across the face. She is then "arrested" by this sight of him bathing. She then, through close proximity to him, falls under his power, a power of which he is aware. The "surprise attack" in this case is both a surprise and an attack, but not in the way Bohrer meant. Although we see Mary anticipating her meeting with Moses, the surprise comes in the outcome of this inevitable meeting--in a flash of steel as the knife plunges down. The cultural norm, which had been disrupted from the moment Mary strikes Moses, is completely torn asunder when Moses murders his mistress. Time stands still and meaning is found in the moment. Once the moment has passed, not even Moses can explain his actions. Continuity of time, of history, of life itself, is disrupted. Mary is no longer an individual, but an idea. Schopenhauer has said that in the moment when a person is no longer an individual but becomes one with the thing itself, the essence is unveiled and true knowledge occurs (Bohrer 119). In Mary's case, knowledge is revealed in her body, through her sense of shock and pain.

The curtain as a metaphor for the veil between the known and the unknown is used throughout the novel; it is through a curtain of darkness and fog that Moses emerges to strike out against Mary; and it is through a curtain that Tony witnesses the intimacy between Moses and Mary. Although the knowledge is not always sought for or wanted, it is revealed just the same. Sometimes the knowledge is even false. When Dick first sees Mary, he sees her in the light of the cinema: "He fidgeted, lit a cigarette, gazed at the dark plush curtains that masked the exits" (45). In the darkness and "queer greenish light" he sees Mary as "the curve of a cheek and a sheaf of fairish glinting hair" (45).

However, when they leave the theater and he is asked to escort her home, he doesn't even recognize her. Yet it is this false vision that stays with him, eventually bringing him back to her door with a proposal of marriage. One of the first things Mary does when she comes to the farm is to sew curtains for the windows. Curtains separate the rooms in the little house. Through the curtain between the bedroom and the sitting room, Moses comes to check on Mary after her breakdown: "she shrank back a little, he was so close to her" (181). This knowledge comes too close to her--too much is being revealed. It is also through the curtains that Mary stands, half-dressed, watching Dick and Tony eating supper. She remains unaware of her state of undress until Dick rises and pulls the curtains together. "Shame flushed her," but only momentarily. Soon she forgets their presence altogether, so concentrated is she on Moses and her fate. Through the curtain the power that Moses wields over Mary is revealed to Tony:

The curtain between this room and the bedroom was drawn back, and he could see in. He was struck motionless by surprise. Mary was sitting on an upended candlebox before the square of mirror nailed on the wall. She was in a garish pink petticoat, and her bony yellow shoulders stuck sharply out of it. Beside her stood Moses, and, as Tony watched, she stood up and held out her arms while the native slipped her dress over them from behind. When she sat down again she shook out her hair from her neck with both hands, with the gesture of a beautiful woman adoring her beauty. Moses was buttoning up the dress; she was looking in the mirror. The attitude of the native was of an indulgent uxoriousness. When he had finished the buttoning, he stood back, and watched the

woman brushing her hair. 'Thank you, Moses,' she said in a high commanding voice. Then she turned, and said intimately " 'You had better go now. It is time for the boss to come.' (213)

When Mary becomes suddenly aware of Tony's presence, she "stopped dead, and stared at him with fear. Then her face, from being tormented, became slowly blank and indifferent" (214), while Moses' reaction was one of "malevolence" (213). It is also through the curtains that Mary stands, half-dressed, watching Dick and Tony eating supper. She remains unaware of her state of undress until Dick rises and pulls the curtains together. "Shame flushed her," but only momentarily. Soon she forgets their presence altogether, so concentrated is she on Moses and her fate.

But for Tony's "interference," Mary would never have had the courage to dismiss Moses. With Tony to lean on, Mary temporarily regains a sense of her own power as a white woman and feels able to break the grip with which Moses had held her. His power as the sublime has depended on Mary's continuing position of subservience, of her terror in his presence. When she dismisses him, the balance of power momentarily shifts, and she views Moses with a sudden contempt. As Burke has pointed out, "wheresoever we find strength, and in what light soever we look upon power, we shall all along observe the sublime the concomitant of terror, and contempt the attendant on a strength that is subservient and innoxious" (61). When Tony jerks Mary back into reality, she can no longer keep up the pretense. The cultural norms in South Africa will not allow her personal relationship with Moses to continue. As Mary dismisses Moses, she releases the full power of the sublime.

The climactic moment of sudden appearance of the sublime jumps out of the darkness and into Mary's conscious awareness as a feeling, a shape, a sound, and a jagged shred of lightning. All of the aspects of the sudden appearance of the sublime are manifest in Mary's acquiescence to its complete power over her and her environment. Mary had never "known" such a power before and subsequently has no recourse but to face it--she cannot fight it, but neither can she fly from it. Until the very end, she still regards Moses as the unknown. She loses her consciousness, her very life, in the throws of the experience. She is reduced to the present and the body, a body that feels pain, shock, grief, a body knowing through the senses alone.

We must note the words Lessing uses to describe the state of mind Mary is in before her death. She is listless (223), forgetful (223), panicked (223), and collapses "like a hare crouching in a tuft of grass, watching the dogs come nearer" (223). She is hunted, pursued, as much by her own fear as anything else. Mary shudders in fear at the sound of thunder and at the sight of lightning on the walls of her tiny house. She feels trapped, "alone," "defenseless," "cornered," and "helpless" (234-235). She is on alert, waiting and watching, fearful of the darkness, blindly groping in "the invisible dark sky" (233 - 235). Her body is intensely aware of every movement and sound, every touch, either real or imagined (218; 235). Burke tells us that in "every thing sudden and unexpected, we are apt to start; that is, we have a perception of danger, and our nature rouses us to guard against it" (76). However, it is testimony to Moses' power over her that instead of guarding against this danger, she walks into it. She is unable to form coherent thoughts for very long, always coming back to the pressure of the darkness, the feeling of being oppressed, her body taut and waiting (224). Furthermore, she is

confused as to the time of day when she first wakes up: "Daylight? Moonlight? Both" (218). She knows that he waits for her, just as she waits for him (223). His power over her keeps her locked in a sphere of inescapable fate. She intuits her fate, even the way she will die, although conscious knowledge of this fate remains unknown:

that between her and the angry sun was a thin strip of blistering iron; that between her and the fatal darkness was a short strip of daylight. . . .The evil is there, but of what it consists, I do not know. (224).

She is compelled to wait for Moses, even though she does not know why. His power, the power of the sublime, commands her. Just as the *sjambok* seems to have whipped Moses of its own accord, she is impelled, driven, a "woman without will" to wait "for the night to come" (224). She walks out into the bush, thinking to confront Moses there:

She stumbled through swathes of pale grass, and the bushes dragged at her dress. She leaned at last against a tree, her eyes shut, her ears filled with noise, her skin aching. (226)

Isolated from everyone, except for Moses, she can no longer even hear her husband, except as that of a stranger, or as someone speaking to her over a great distance: "Dick's voice sounded in her ears like the echo of a voice across a valley. She was listening to the night outside. And slowly, the terror engulfed her which she had known must come. Once she lay down, and turned her face into the darkness of the pillows, but her eyes were alive with light, and against the light she saw a dark, waiting shape" (234). Her body is attuned to her surroundings; everything relevant to her is located in the present and in the body.

Now it seemed as if the night were closing in on her, and the little house was bending over like a candle, melting in the heat. She heard the crack, crack; the restless moving of the iron above, and it seemed to her that a vast black body, like a human spider, was crawling over the roof, trying to get inside. She was alone. She was defenseless. She was shut in a small black box, the walls closing in on her, the roof pressing down. She was in a trap, cornered and helpless. (234-235)

She has been reduced completely to the parameters of her own body, the house just an extension of these boundaries.

The evening of the murder, she is driven outside by her fear of Moses, as well as by her fear of helplessness, to wait. The trees crowd in toward her: "She thought that as she watched they moved nearer; and she pressed back against the wall with all her strength, so that she could feel the rough brick pricking through her nightgown into her flesh" (235). The darkness around her is full of "gulfs" and sounds, of "menacing shapes" (235). She imagines that "the long loose paw of a wildcat" grabs at her foot as she crosses the floor to the front porch. As she waits for the inevitable confrontation with fate, she stands on the front porch of her house: "Her feet firmly planted on the tepid rough brick of the floor, her back held against the wall, she crouched and stared, all her senses stretched, rigidly breathing in little gasps" (236).

Out of the darkness, thunder and lightning, Moses emerges, a force of nature, the appearance of the sublime. The description of his appearance is rooted in the present and to the immediate sphere of the body: coherent thought becomes impossible. "She saw a man's shape move out from the dark and come towards her, gliding silently up the steps. .

. .She could see his great shoulders, the shape of his head, the glistening of his eyes" (236). Mary feels guilt at her disloyalty to him in front of Tony, and thinks "she had only to . . .explain, to appeal, and the terror would be dissolved" (236). The confrontation with the sublime, however, is silent, and for its silence, all the more terrifying. Words are always inadequate in the presence of the sublime. He doesn't want to hear her words. The time for words has passed. Mary's encounter with the sublime leaves her speechless, and the only response that is possible is one of violent change:

She opened her mouth to speak; and, as she did so, saw his hand, which held a long curving shape, lifted above his head; and she knew it would be too late. All her past slid away, and her mouth, opened in appeal, let out the beginning of a scream, which was stopped by a black wedge of hand inserted between her jaws. But the scream continued, in her stomach, choking her; and she lifted her hands, clawlike, to ward him off. And then the bush avenged itself: that was her last thought. The trees advanced in a rush, like beasts, and the thunder was the noise of their coming. As the brain at last gave way, collapsing in a ruin of horror, she saw, over the big arm that forced her head back against the wall, the other arm descending. Her limbs sagged under her, the lightning leaped out from the dark, and darted down the plunging steel. (236)

As Tony realizes when he tries to piece together the events surrounding the murder, words could never have been adequate: "The struggle that had been decided in a few brief words--or rather, in the silences between the words--had nothing to do with the

surface meaning of the scene" (21). The impact on Mary of this horrible act is even greater because of Moses' silence. From Kierkegaard, we learn the following:

The most terrible words that sound from the abyss of evil would not be able to produce an effect like that of the suddenness of the leap that lies within the confines of the mimical. . . .All the despair and all the horror of evil expressed in a word are not as terrible as silence. (7)

As Moses approaches, she wants to speak to him, she to let words of explanation come between them and perhaps heal the rift she had opened when she ordered him to leave, but before she can speak, he shoves his hand in her mouth: it is too late for words. For Moses to hear her speak would humanize her--it would leave open the avenues of communication, and according to Kierkegaard, "the negation of continuity is the sudden" (43). History is disrupted in this leap--this silent act that negates communication and individuality. All of life has come down to the present moment--the knife, the darkness, two bodies, blood, and silence.

As Charlie Slatter faces Moses after the murder, Moses stares back at him "expressionless, indifferent" (9). He seems "quite impassive, allowing himself to be directed without any movement of his own. His face was blank" (20). According to Kant, "the anger of someone fearsome is sublime," and not just anger, but "open bold revenge" (53). The element of sublimity is heightened in the act of revenge, says Kant, "even if he is dragged to a disgraceful death. . .if to some extent" the "rogue" goes to his death "defiantly and with disdain" (53). Interestingly enough, after the murder, Moses does not run back into the bush to escape capture. Rather, he goes to Tony Marsten, sees that he is sleeping, completely unaware of Moses' presence or what has transpired that

evening, and walks back outside to see the scene that he had created, Mary slumped on the porch, the dogs circling and sniffing her, as illuminated by a flash of lightning. "And this was his final moment of triumph, a moment so perfect and complete that it took the urgency from thoughts of escape, leaving him indifferent" (238). In a confrontation with the sublime, it is the sublime that triumphs, not the subject. The simplicity, frankness, suddenness of its appearance overwhelms and allows for no other outcome. As Mary had predicted, she has been reduced to "a mound of reddish mud, swathed with rotting thatch like the hair of a dead person" (Lessing 226). Not only is Mary reduced to the present and to the body, then, by her fatal last encounter with the sublime, but also she is reduced to the very earth from which she sprang. The "things perceptible to the sense" and the "one who perceives" have become one, but not in the Schopenhauer sense of oneness. And the meaning is in the moment. It is the stuff of cognitive revolution, this sudden appearance of the sublime. As its embodiment, Moses exudes the greatness, the defiance, the darkness and the terror of the wholly Other which will not be absorbed into ordinary experience. Things-as-they-have-been will be no longer.

In conclusion, this novel provides us with a site on which to test the theories of the aesthetics of the unseen, cognitive aesthetics and the ethics of such cognition. We must move from a fixed model of cognition, in which all of the meanings are stable and indubitable, "truths" that are out there waiting to be revealed and disseminated in palatable forms to the masses, to an aesthetics that is dialectic in nature. A cognitive model in which meaning is anything but fixed is one which shifts over a period of time, revealing more and more of itself through multiple perspectives which are gained through the use of all of the senses. This model forms the basis of an interaction, an engagement,

with the object to create meaning, not to simply accept a meaning that has already been inscribed by a culture or a society. This model brings us back to Walter Benjamin's perception of the collector of history--one whose perspective "blows apart the continuum [of history] opening history up to amore provocative analysis" (SBM June 18). In Lessing's novel, we see, at least in part, Benjamin's desire for art to restore our ability to learn with our senses for our preservation. Mary is murdered, Dick goes mad, and the farm itself gives way to the bush because the knowledge of the senses was not heeded and acted upon. The land, the people, the culture of South Africa had been trivialized and ignored. If all we ever do as critics, as teachers, as human beings, is to describe what is there, going around and around in a never-ending hermeneutic circle, as in historical/cultural relativism, how can we ever hope to learn or better yet, to empathize with the world view of the Other? At our own peril we will continue to see the gods of others as fetishes and our own as possessing real and ultimate value.

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