

An Aesthetics of Intensity: Lisa Moore's Sublime Worlds

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An Aesthetics of Intensity: Lisa Moore's Sublime Worlds

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She had awakened in Philip's apartment, ten years ago. Trembling, partly from the hangover, but mostly from fright. She knew she was in love. How terrible.

"Grace," *Open*, 210.

I HAVE BEEN INTRIGUED by — and, in fact, share — critics' almost unanimous interest in what one might call the prose energies of Newfoundland writer Lisa Moore's fiction, which includes two collections of short stories, *Degrees of Nakedness* (1995) and *Open* (2002), and a recent novel, *Alligator* (2005). Hers is a narrative force characterized by a magnification of emotion, an urgency of plot, and frank eroticism. Reviewers frequently note the kinetic quality of her work, using terms like "force," "urgency," and "power." Critics have praised the affective quality of her writing with epithets like "breathtaking," "invigorating," "startling," and "astonishing." David Creelman, in his recent *Canadian Literature* review of *Open*, notes that Moore often does not foreshadow events. As a result, "the reader is left feeling the full force of life's arbitrary rhythm" (170). *Fwd: Calgary's News and Entertainment Weekly* points to the astonishing quality of *Alligator* with references to dramatic content. The reviewer selects quotations about a "super-horny" boyfriend and an alligator "trying to tear [a] man's head from his shoulders" to support this evaluation (paragraph 9). Astonishment is summoned up, it seems, by Moore's efficiency in truth telling, her way of getting things just right. *The Irish Examiner* marvels at Moore's "crystal clear prose," *The Globe and Mail* at her "jarring insight," *The Scotsman* at her ability to make the reader feel "that the glimpses you get of [characters] are the most significant, the most telling glimpses you could possibly have" (McDermid, paragraphs 7-8).

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Reviewers, journalists, and literary critics have praised the intensity of Moore's fiction in the mainstream press and in short reviews. For some reason, however, one of Newfoundland and Labrador's most celebrated writers has not attracted the close scholarly attention her work warrants. This article, addressing that oversight, explores at some length how Lisa Moore's fiction enacts what one might call an "aesthetics of intensity." It begins by showing how Moore's prose style is similar to the hyper-real in its depictions of the quotidian. It then links this hyper-real presentation with the gothic and romantic sublime. I consider Moore's sensuous prose through the lens of what Barbara Freeman has termed "the feminine sublime." Throughout, I argue that Moore's moments of upheaval and intensity bring the reader back to an ethical understanding of what is good and right in our world — simply, human connection. Moments of intensity and vulnerability are for the most part redemptive. They often bring characters closer — to each other or to some wellspring of strength — and underscore the necessity of community and interconnectivity in Moore's alienating and lonely worlds. What is more, these narrative intensities offer the possibility of wonder and vitality in the everyday world, show us that the domestic can be numinous; the mundane, quietly miraculous.

INTENSITY AND THE HYPER-REAL

One might first ask what makes a writer intense or astonishing. Intensity is not easy to pin down. It is not something that can be easily described or even shown, but is produced, engendered. One might begin to tease out strategies of intensity in Moore's prose, however, by noting her tendency to locate powerful insights or prophetic visions in a single image, gesture, or moment, a kind of narrative compression that pulsates. This technique of hinging meaning on a dramatized significant moment, a frozen tableau almost imagistically presented, brings to mind Peter Brook's pioneering study, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, and in particular what he calls melodrama's "aesthetics of astonishment." According to Brooks, that often maligned mode of representation, melodramatic rhetoric, opened up a new moral and aesthetic category, that of the "interesting," in its drama of the ordinary. Moore's restrained prose (not everything is given away), unsentimental visions, and psychological complexity resist in many ways melodramatic interpretation. But, as Brook argues, just as melodrama "exerts pressure on the surface of things" and celebrates intense significances beyond the ordinary, Moore's focus on a given moment (with its precise quality of light, exact position of mundane objects, and its ability to evoke uncanny prophesy) implies that a whole world of inner significance lies beyond that outward gesture (2). Things remain to be said, but possibly cannot be said. This suggestion of un-containable, but somehow contained, significance creates intensity in Moore's fiction.

Moore's stylistic techniques produce a degree of (yes, nakedness, but also of) *presence*, a concept explicated by rhetoricians Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. They define presence as a strategy of "displaying ... certain elements on which the speaker wishes to center attention in order that they may occupy the foreground of the hearer's consciousness" (142). Such focus means that certain selections are impressed "on the consciousness with a certain intensity" (143). A writer or orator can achieve psychological presence for absent or abstract concepts — a strategy of paramount importance to argumentation, these rhetorical theorists argue — through the essential element of proximity, of pulling an object close in time and space and making it concrete. At its most basic, one might select the present tense for the depiction of an event to make it more real. Moore's fluid and sometimes disorienting movements across time are effected in part through a pervasive present tense, one filled with concrete, hyper-sensory details. In one short story, "Azalea," for instance, the reader watches a fly as it is focalized through the eyes of a woman standing deep in thought at her window: "The fly hyper-vivid, rubbing its forelegs together, one on top of the other, then switching, so the alternate leg is on top." The reader soon discovers that this fly, seemingly so alive, has been "dead for years" (*Open* 114).

This strategy of providing detailed descriptions of a character's world, David Creelman argues, is characteristic of literary realism, a realism he sees in much Maritime fiction. This realism "is part of an attempt to convince the reader that the textual world is a real world" (21). One might push Creelman's claim further, however, and suggest that Moore offers a hyper-realist style, a prose technique acknowledged by the author herself. Hers is a high-fidelity verisimilitude that does not simply reproduce approximations of the real, but attempts to improve upon the real, making it brighter and sharper. Sharpness is, indeed, one of Moore's prevalent themes, carrying over into character traits and word choices. In *Degrees of Nakedness*, for instance, the reader enters a world of sharp bicycle bells, sharp creases in shoes, a sharply photographed crow, and sharp telephone rings. This world includes the sharply named Marika, a chemistry professor who, like her implied author creator, "is interested in sharpness" ("Purgatory's Wild Kingdom" 86). Comparing her textual depiction to photorealistic representation, one finds in Moore's fiction a more definitive rendering of lived realities than photorealism would. Hers is a reality with slightly more supersaturated colour, granular detail (another of Moore's metaphors), and clinical edges.

Another story from *Degrees of Nakedness* provides a glimpse into Moore's hyper-real world and its attendant intensity. Here, one encounters the protagonist, Donna, a woman who happens to be looking for epiphanies and finds one when she discovers through the baby monitor that her husband has been sleeping with a stunning Marxist:

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After I found out that Cy had slept with Marie I sat on the fire escape with my foot on the railing, and a spider crawled over my foot, my toes tensed, each toe stretching away from the others. I could feel the spider make its web, lacing my toes together. It struck me that I had never felt anything so sharply before. That's how a story should work ("Nipple of Paradise" 2).

In this passage, one feels the cataclysmic discovery of infidelity (compressed in a small fire escape and in the body of a spider), along with the magnification of each small toe and the sensation of a web being formed there. This passage details a sensation likely magnified beyond the physical capability of a real body. It is a hyper-sensory description akin to hyper-realism in painting, where artists sometimes render details that would be beyond human seeing. Art historian Barbara Stafford notes that the hyper-real is often characterized by compression coupled with magnification, a picture of chromosomes viewed through a magnifying glass of water, for instance. Furthermore, this narrative moment includes a meta-critique by the implied author, who tells us this is "how a story should work." A sense of playfulness and of a designing author emerges, an explicit self-stylizing presence not unlike the obvious computer-mediation in much high-resolution hyper-realist art. The reader senses that the moment is artificially intensified through meticulous detailing (by both the mildly theatrical fictional character and the intensifying author), a moment forced to be more than if it existed in the "real world."¹

Intensity is generated in this passage, too, by the meditative setting, which recalls phenomenologist Henri Bachelard's whimsical contemplations of "intimate immensity" in the work of Baudelaire, particularly in the author's use of the word "vast":

When a relaxed spirit meditates and dreams ... [t]he mind sees and continues to see objects, while the spirit finds the nest of immensity in an object.... Here, we discover that immensity in the intimate domain is intensity, an intensity of being, the intensity of a being evolving in a vast perspective of intimate intensity (190, 193).

Moore's female protagonist, fittingly, sits on a fire *escape*, a setting that might suggest that place of daydream, an activity which Bachelard links with flight, as "it transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity" (183). As in Moore's spare syntax, where vast feelings find themselves wrapped in small packages (and hence intensely vibrant), so too this moment, with the woman sitting motionless and alone in this small space, suggests an intense inner immensity of contemplation.

One finds here, too, one moment, one woman, one spider. These singularities in representation recall the work of visual hyper-realists like Chuck Close, who, as Barbara Stafford notes, paints huge pictures of faces, magnifying pores and strands

of hair. She argues that “the hyperreal is also wrapped up with the insistently single and the singular,” an insight that invites parallels with the singularities of love (paragraph 10). Philosopher Martha Nussbaum, drawing on the work of Adam Smith, articulates the link between the singularity of a person and the intensities of erotic love in her neo-Stoic study of the emotions, *Upheavals of Thought*: “Love is an intense response to perceptions of the particularity, and the particular high value, of another person’s body and mind” (465). This intensity, she tells us, has made philosophers wary of erotic love, and some (like Kant, for example) would remove it altogether from ethical life, arguing that it resists the necessary remove and equipoise required for a more distanced empathy, which constitutes the grounds of compassion.

But love — especially hard, dangerous love — constitutes the ethical centre of Lisa Moore’s fiction. It affirms risk and an ecstatic energy of the body. Her “aesthetics of astonishment,” to borrow literary critic Peter Brook’s rich phrase, is driven by one of her most enduring fascinations, a preoccupation yet unexplored by critics of her work: her sublime rendering of love and life. Her hyper-real representation of love’s moments communicates a desire not unlike that of the Romantic sublime. There was a desire for pushing beyond the mundane, for finding a surplus of reality and transcendence in the intensification of everyday objects and relations. As already suggested, one feels in Moore’s narratives, too, the Romantic preoccupation with the individual that also characterizes the hyper-real. The hyper-real often represents individual bodies and particularly minuscule parts of bodies. Cells, mites, and the magnified wings of insects are objects of intense interest in this style. Such individuation, indeed solitariness, is a constant theme in Moore’s fiction. Her characters ultimately walk through life alone, grieving, misunderstood, marginalized, abandoned, and vulnerable, even in the presence of others. A woman stands alone with her crying child in a grocery store at four in the morning. A girl hovers alone at the edge of a dizzying-high diving board with her coach below. A taxidermist eats alone in a restaurant with only the server as company, and she is listening to a television set with earphones in. The list goes on.

In keeping with this train of thought concerning an ethics of intensity, I point to the connection between the intense moment and wonder, which is demonstrated so beautifully in this passage under consideration. Significant is the young woman’s sudden insight: “It *struck me* that I had never felt anything so sharply before” (emphasis mine, 2). The notion of being struck by something (and its connection with wonder) is examined by philosopher Philip Fisher in his book *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*. He argues that we do not “experience” the ordinary because the ordinary is that which does not elicit notice. It is that which occurs when “there are no experiences going on” (20). Wonder, on the other hand, is tied up with discovery and with surprise and is characterized, according to Fisher, by three things: “by suddenness, by the moment of first seeing, and by the

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visual presence of the whole state or object” (21). Such wonder, he claims, is best summoned up by architecture, feats of engineering, and the rainbow.

The wondrous rainbow is one of Moore’s frequent images. In *Alligator*, for instance, an actress named Isobel (discussed at greater length later in this paper) finds herself in a “sparkle-riven” wave as she loses herself in the refraction of North Atlantic waters. Moore frequently signifies the dispersal of self in terms of refracted light, a light that often co-occurs with characters feeling fragmented or somewhat lost in thought, in memory, or in fact. One grief-lost woman, Beverly, hangs 183 crystal prisms in the windows of her house. Moore’s numbering of the prisms is worth noting within a context of hyper-realism. Critics have noticed in that artistic movement “an intense empiricism of physical enumeration” (“Hyper-realism,” paragraph 9). A police officer coming to Beverly’s house gets distracted by the light of these crystals, some indication of the prism’s power to draw one away to other spectral realms. In that same novel, a little boy on a St. John’s street breaks a bubble into “sunsparkling mist” (229). Beverly’s daughter Colleen has a flashing rhinestone in her bellybutton, which glitters as she dances alone, lost in her own dramatized young sensuality.

Fisher argues that narrative and music fail to summon up wonder as easily as natural architectonics do. As temporal arts, story and music can “never present as a whole in an instant of time,” the way an iceberg or a painting or a pyramid can, for instance. While our personal life narratives are temporal, I would still argue for the possibility of narrative wonder in the intense moment. The woman on the fire escape realizes in a flash (and without any expectation of feeling so) that her life has been until that point anesthetized. She is seeing the whole of her life before her in an instant. She wonders, with some pleasure in the sharpness, at her lack of felt experience up to that point. She is, as she tells us, “struck” by an unprecedented, rare experience. As Fisher writes:

Being struck by something is exactly that opposite of being struck dumb. The tie between wonder and learning is clear in the moment when after long confusion and study you suddenly say, “Now I get it!” ... In an instant, unexpectedly, the answer is seen for the first time, and all that was a puzzle of unrelated facts up to that instant turns into clarity and order. The experience of discovery cannot be repeated. When we go back over the steps of the problem, the solution that surprised us when we first saw it is now just one more obvious step (21).

Moore’s project, it seems to me, is to communicate stylistically, “the visual presence of the whole state or object” Fisher designates as necessary to the state of wonder. Her instants of wonder are sensory moments in which all the details come in at once through the body. Only after the cataclysm do her characters set out to make sense of them, learn something from those moments. There is an intellectual component to their wondrous encounters (they wonder about things), a journey that makes Moore’s stories so compelling. It seems to be her characters’ task to make

sense of wondrous moments after the fact — through story. Those who might not otherwise stand out from a crowd become vividly narrating and narrated. In the example discussed here, the young woman discovers in a flash the hitherto monochromatic dullness of her ordinary life, a moment akin to seeing a new colour or discovering new nerve cells. And she not only tells her story, but also theorizes a poetics, the means by which “a story should work.”

THE HYPER-REAL AND THE SUBLIME

Moments of intensity, then, can be moments of wonder. Moore’s intensities, however, also slide beyond the wondrous hyper-real and into the sublime, into moments where characters are, in fact, “struck dumb.” While many critics of the sublime have accepted the “uncomfortable fact” that there may be “no essence of the sublime,” one can still locate familial resemblances that congregate around that term (Morris 300). *Ecstasy* is a good place to start. The first text credited with discussion of the sublime, Longinus’ *Peri Hupsous*, defines the sublime (in keeping with the agonistic model of rhetoric in his day) as an overwhelming force. It involves a transport or ecstasy (*ekstasis*) prompted by a given piece of writing or oratory that possesses or takes over a listener. We come to “believe we have created what we have only heard” (chapters I: 4, VII: 2). We are ravished, overcome, and as previously mentioned, struck dumb.

The fire escape-sitting woman speaks earlier in that same tale of the birth of her premature little girl and reveals that she “couldn’t find any significance, the birth wasn’t a symbol or metaphor, it just happened, a clean thing; a thing unto itself, a pure wordless thing. I was struck dumb” (*Degrees of Nakedness* 8). Larger-than-life, hurtling-towards-death Madeleine, a Newfoundland filmmaker in *Alligator*, points up the challenges of articulating sublime vision, not only in her excessive displays of self but in the excesses of her film material:

The film she is making now will be better than any film ever made by anyone. Better than Bergman. This film will contain everything. It will contain everything. It will contain everything (154).

The repeated refrain effectively amplifies the impossibility and perhaps anxiety of containing excess. Madeleine’s always deferred and ultimately unfinished film underscores the impossibility of ever representing the intensities of rock and sea and Archbishop Fleming’s religious fervour. Madeleine has a budget that her creative vision exceeds, too. She is always adjusting her spending and seeking funding elsewhere, and she dies of heart failure before the piece is finished. It turns out to be larger than her life. And as her unconscious mind reveals, in keeping with Burke’s terrible sublime, Madeleine is profoundly terrified of the subject

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matter of her film. She dreams of Archbishop Fleming “cracking a whip over the backs of four white stallions, and they come tearing out of a snow squall like the wrath of God” (225).

One might add *terror*, then, to this masculine understanding of the sublime. Edmund Burke, in his eighteenth-century treatise, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, was the first to bring together terror and the sublime and to separate the masculine sublime from the feminine beautiful: “terror is in all cases whatsoever either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime” (54). More recently, Paul H. Fry studies the sublime in terms of possession, fear, and “the doom of take-over” (187), while Philip Fisher surmises that “the sublime could be called the aestheticization of fear” (2). Later theorists, still working within a conflictual model where the sublime entails a struggle for power, locate death (or potential death) as a necessary element of the sublime. Jahan Ramazani, for instance, views the sublime “as a staged confrontation with death”² in which “the anticipation of death gives rise to a counterassertion of life” (164). He contends that:

death precipitates the emotional turning called the sublime, although theorists of the sublime often refer to death by other names, or by what Kenneth Burke terms ‘deflections.’ These deflections include nothingness, castration, physical destruction, semiotic collapse, defeat by a precursor, and annihilation of the ego (164).

Writers locate the sublime turn at that moment when the vulnerable self confronts and surmounts an obstacle, or what Neil Hertz calls a “blocking agent.” This agent, often constructed as feminine, could be chaos, overwhelming oceans, obstacles to creative production, or any encounter with infinity or the vast. Whatever the case, the sublime entails the presence of some “other.” The sublime takes us to the city limits of the symbolic, the frontier of linguistic representation.

Terror and the sublime are defining forces in filmmaker Madeleine’s life. She remembers her blissful, sex-filled honeymoon in Spain with her now ex-husband Marty many years before, when they were young and poor and their life as hitchhikers risky and peripatetic:

They hitchhiked to Madrid and fell asleep in a transport truck and the driver pulled over on a hill and got out to smoke under the stars and came back with a flowering branch of an almond tree cold with dew. She woke because the rain from the almond branch dropped on her cheek. She was disoriented and the flowers filled the cab with a green, sugary tang and the smell of cigarettes reminded her of her father, dead for years then.

Groggy with sleep, the flowers and cold night wind made her potently frightened. She was way too much in love.

Smell the flower, the Spaniard said.

I am too much in love, she said (*Alligator* 96).

Madeleine is literally in the sublime space of transport (even if it is a *transport* truck) and in a space of confined excess in its cramped cab. In the liminal space between sleeping and waking, she feels the disorienting horror of being submersed in something a lot bigger than she is. The altered state of her body here is just one example of sublime moments where Moore's characters are afflicted by fevers, heart palpitations, aneurysms, drunkenness, electrocution, nausea, vertigo, or extreme toothache. It suggests an altered state of consciousness, which in Moore's fiction is a site of both fascination and disorientation. The disorienting magnitude of Madeleine's love is frightening because it makes her feel out of control. Her passivity is registered in her sense that she is standing still while the landscape slips past her. Further, she feels vulnerable to the truck driver's commands and in-her-face offerings. The sublime's central characteristic — its impelling of, but ultimate resistance to, symbolization — is evident here, too. Madeline seems compelled to tell the driver of her plight as her lover sleeps, but it seems her English is not comprehensible to the Spanish truck driver. Just as the sublime presents the subject with the inexpressible, so Madeleine finds herself unable to express her panic to this other, the passage calling attention to a love that cannot be translated, a love beyond measure.

It may be stating the obvious to say that Moore's books, particularly *Alligator*, are filled with menace, death, and fear of the annihilation of self. One finds alligators, chanting crowds in a bar, girls hitch-hiking, moose collisions, Russian drug dealers, impending heart attacks, and overwhelming grief and despair. Even tree-devouring worms, with their "tiny jaws munching persistently, killing everything," make for a terrifying place (*Alligator* 76). In many ways, Moore's is a gothic sublime, her books illustrating "the connection between the pleasure principle and the death-instinct, and ... its relationship between horror and terror — or the abject and the sublime" (Nadal 374). But, as suggested already, there are resilient romantic impulses, too. Those worms in *Alligator*, for instance (a presence reminiscent of Carol Shields' *The Republic of Love* and its insidious Winnipeg cankerworms), ultimately become ethereal moths at novel's end. This ending suggests a divine transcendence that complicates a reading of Moore as having an exclusively gothic vision and suggests an equally optimistic representation of the numinous. In Moore's writing, one finds hints of a romantic sublime co-existent with a gothic one, if such simple divisions can be allowed. Like the moths in *Alligator*, the romantic image of the butterfly shows up in the final story of Moore's *Open* as protagonist Eleanor, gazing down upon her clothes at a wedding, surmises that "if she were visited by a moment of grace, the beads of the dress might drop to the grass and the diamonds unfold into butterflies" ("Grace" 153).

Hence, an ethics of intensity emerges in Moore's vision. Hers is a persistent belief in grace, a faith in redemptive love underlying moments of terror. Such hope pervades Moore's stories, no matter how tentative or precarious the lives of her characters. Through the fear, anxiety, and insecurity that the sublime prompts,

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Moore's characters face "the subject's experience of its limits," the fragility that love exposes "call[ing] into question its [the subject's] previous conceptual boundaries" (Williams 76). A crucial element in Moore's philosophy is the acknowledgment of limits and the desire, in some cases, to destroy them. These limits also show us the vulnerability that accompanies an openness to being broken open, the title of Moore's second short story collection exemplifying this. As the final section of this essay argues, Moore seems to tell us that acknowledged vulnerability makes for better people, human beings capable of respecting the fragility of others and forging deep connection with the people in their world. Shared vulnerability constitutes a means of humane survival that offers an alternative to the instincts of alligators and the slashing violence of love-deprived Russian villains.

MOORE AND THE FEMININE SUBLIME

In thinking about Moore's sublime worlds, I take my lead from literary critic Barbara Freeman, who, in her book *The Feminine Sublime*, challenges the desire in masculine definitions of the sublime to contain excess, to order and control it. One can trace in Moore's narratives feminine alternatives to a traditionally masculine discourse like Wordsworth's or Kant's. Their work on the sublime reveals a testosterone-heavy history preoccupied with mastery over the threat of the insurmountable and with asserting supremacy, through rational thought, over the awe-inspiring moment. Incidentally, feminist philosophers have noted a similar impetus in the philosophical tradition to reign in and discipline erotic love. One sees "a recurrent attempt to reform or educate erotic love, so as to keep its creative force while purifying it of ambivalence and excess and making it more friendly to social aims" (Nussbaum 469).

A meeting between a male story editor and Eleanor, one of Moore's protagonists in the short story "Grace," illustrates the feminine sublime's difference from the masculine drive for control. When Eleanor proposes a story line about grief and love to the story editor, he proceeds to corset her script with a timeline:

The screenplay is a messy jumble. Everything out of order. Full of dream sequences (self-indulgent, according to the story editor), the death, snowstorms, pregnancy, a prison where Sandra teaches art to a young woman who had attacked someone with a hammer.... The story editor takes up a coloured marker and approaches a flip chart. He draws a timeline. He says, A half-hour screenplay is twenty-four pages. I want the grief fully realized by page four. I want to see the character attempt to overcome grief three times by page twenty. Three failed attempts, but each time she gets closer. I want the sexual awakening on page twenty. By page twenty-four she has come through (*Open* 191-92).

A masculine economy of efficiency and quantitative measure reins in the jumble and disorder of pain after love. As Freeman writes of the feminine sublime, “at issue is not only the attempt to represent excess, which by definition breaks totality and cannot be bound, but the desire for excess itself; not just the description of, but the wish for, sublimity” (16). Like Eleanor, many of Moore’s characters yearn for the intensity, ambivalence, and revision of self that openness to such sublime experience might bring, especially when it comes to exposing oneself to the risks of love. Colleen, the young (and ultimately benign) eco-terrorist in *Alligator*, dreams of a shark she once saw in a glass-bottomed boat: “What I dream is falling over. Some part of me wants to fall over. In every dream I am about to fall over the side and be devoured by something” (196-97). Her aunt (who happens to be filmmaker Madeleine) articulates a similar desire for losing herself in something bigger, even if it is a bean-bag couch: “The couch threatened to slowly, gradually, swallow her whole, and she thought she might just let herself be swallowed. Why not give in?” (46).

Another character in *Alligator* is David, known only through flashback, as he has already died of an aneurysm at the time of the novel’s primary action. He finds himself attracted to the death summons of sublime ravishment, this time on the cliffs of Ireland. His widow Beverly thinks back, after his death, to one of their final telephone conversations:

The next time she spoke to David he was in Berlin and he said that he’d stood at the edge of a cliff in Ireland, in a small village full of ancient Druid dwellings of stone, and the wind through the crevices had sounded like voices and he’d suffered from vertigo and nearly given in (*Alligator* 100).

“Vertigo,” Freeman points out, “is a typically sublime feeling connected with the falling away of ground or center; it is what we feel when an abyss opens up before us” (50). Striking here is David’s seduction by the *sound* of wind and voices, an alternative to the masculine, *sight*-centred renderings of the sublime by such Romantics as Wordsworth or Kant. The wind is not a lexical language, but sounds only like tonal “voices.” Similar to the sublime moment experienced by Madeleine in the transport truck, this mystical experience, too, exceeds language. Just as this passage contests traditional notions of the sight-sublime, this feminine sublime, as Freeman argues, does “not exhibit the same concern with self-preservation” as traditional models do (19). It challenges the totalizing critical distance integral Burke and Kant’s understandings of the sublime, a detachment intended to guard against possible obliteration in the face of something vast or genuinely awe-inspiring.

Desiring the sublime, being open to it, is significant in a feminist literary interpretation. It is uncertain whether Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* was an inspiration for Moore’s *Alligator*, but there are remarkable similarities between Edna

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Pontellier's sublime encounter with the sea and significant moments when several of Moore's female characters come close to death in the ocean.³ These women experience sublime encounters with another world in which "the self, simultaneously disabled and empowered, testifies to what exceeds it" (Freeman 16). Madeline, for instance, almost drowns in the ocean when she is visiting Florida during a conference. She learns how dangerous the ocean can be. And like Edna Pontellier, who almost drowns on the first night she learns to swim, Madeleine makes no mention of it to the people she encounters later in the day. Another character who finds herself in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean is Isobel, a fragile, self-absorbed beauty, an actor whom Madeline has brought back to Newfoundland for her film. Immersed up to her waist in salt water, Isobel has an almost erotic response for the waters that beat against her:

The anticipation of the hurling mass of the next wave, which is cold and mounting triumphantly and about crotch high, is huge, and if this wave hits her she's getting all the way in. Like the world exhaling. A hammering home of the truth. A refusal to be a wave any longer. The wave accepts the absurdity of being a wave, but also recognizes the beach for what it is: a reckoning.

Who said it would go on forever?

Nobody said.

They said quite the opposite.

There is no cold on earth as unequivocal as this wave that is higher than her head and about to smash itself against her skull. It is as cold as cold can be. Because how can matter be so blasted with sunlight, so sparkle-riven, and curve with such blood lust and be so soul numbing? A wave is the bone around a marrow of light.

Isobel is standing up to her waist and wading out and she gets the wave full force, right in the face, up her nose, in her ears, in her mouth, down her throat, out her nostrils (*Alligator* 224).

Many theorists and poets draw upon images of the ocean to communicate the sublime, the waves of the North Atlantic here a source of both pleasure and of pain. In Isobel's relationship with the Atlantic Ocean, we see (as Freeman sees in the erotic poetry of Sappho) a mutual possession, an alternative understanding of the sublime in which a subject is possessed by some overwhelming and possibly obliterating force, but also *possesses* that force. The wave can "mount" Isobel, can enter her nose, ears and mouth, but she can enter those waves of force, too ("[get] all the way in"). One terrible wave can "smash itself against her skull," but she is wading out into it, an act of agency that intensifies and highlights her desire for unification with the water and for dispossession. Moore recognizes in this scene of possible destruction a means of revelation: an openness to self-obliteration and the desire to be one with something bigger, a moment in which this beautiful, imprisoned-in-self actress becomes uncharacteristically less narcissistic. This moment of intensity creates a means of con-

nection with her world, an instant when she acknowledges her frailty in the force of nature and simultaneously summons up a strength in facing it.

AN ETHICS OF INTENSITY: VULNERABILITY AND HUMANITY

Vulnerable: 1. able to be physically or emotionally hurt; 2. liable to damage or harm, esp. from aggression or attack; 3. exposed or susceptible to a destructive agent or influence [Late Latin *vulnerabilis* from Latin *vulnerare* to wound, from *vulnus* -eris wound]

— from the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, Second Edition, 1744

How does an aesthetics of intensity lend itself to an ethical vision of the good and necessary in life? Even a cursory glance at the titles of Lisa Moore's three books — *Degrees of Nakedness*, *Open*, and *Alligator* — suggests a fragility of being in a possibly malicious world, an exposure to harm, in short, a state of vulnerability. Her book covers, fittingly, display exposed bodies, which stand as a site of intense feeling, pain, sexual pleasure, and emotion. Moore's sublime world ultimately offers a meditation upon vulnerability. Keeping company with her visions of human relations can teach us something about our humanness in a world of changing events beyond our control.⁴ Characters who are lost, characters who are alone, characters who are betrayed — Moore's fiction seems to offer readers a meditation on death, and therefore on living. She contemplates absence through intense presence. She focuses on fragility and thereby emphasizes the strength of love between people and the continuous threat of its loss. And therein, I would argue, lies the ethical message in Moore's intensities. These intensities point to characters' necessary interconnectivity in a world of lack and absence.

Significantly, not only is the feminine sublime a place of self-refraction and rainbows, but it is also a site of absence. In Isobel's case above, one senses this central absence in the wave, a "bone around a marrow of light" (224). Absence is a palpable character in Moore's writing: a dead ex-husband or mother, missing parental love, an estranged child.⁵ Moore's books are mediations on intense longing, longing for something lost. Isobel longs for a former lover, Chris, the immensity of whom speaks, again, of the vastness of the sublime: "she loved something so huge it must have been him" (*Alligator* 223).

Anne Williams, in *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* writes that "[t]he word 'sublime' comes from the Latin for 'under the threshold,' a metaphor of language and the self as a building" (77). This definition suggests that the sublime occurs in the space between — and slips under. It is striking how often houses represent the human psyche or the human body in Moore's books, the vulnerability of houses mirroring that of the residents within them. The collection *Degrees of Nakedness*,

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and its short story of the same name, is particularly full of vulnerable houses and inhabitants:

The top half of Joan's house caught fire and burned while she slept downstairs. The microwave and television melted into lumps as smooth and shiny as beach rocks. She woke up to make herself a cup of tea in the morning and when she got upstairs everything was black. The furniture was in cinders. The windows were blackened with soot. She walked into the centre of the living room and looked around her. Her footsteps had exposed the green and gold shag carpet beneath the soot.... The fire chief said it was a miracle Joan was still alive. The temperature had risen to three thousand degrees ("Degrees of Nakedness" 45).

In this same story, a woman breaks into her lover's house with a gun and violently smashes out windows, tears paintings off the wall, and spills the contents of the fridge all over the floor. Then the lover is vulnerable to a regime of surveillance as a curious CBC reporter points a camera at her through the broken window. In the story, "Ingrid Catching Snowflakes on her Tongue," one reads of the façade of a demolished apartment building: "The face was pried away; it fell onto the street with a ringing slap" (*Degrees of Nakedness* 113). In "The Lonely Goatherd," Moore describes precariously perched houses on a St. John's hill: "The houses dig their heels into the hill to stop from tumbling into the harbour" (*Degrees of Nakedness* 123). A short story in this same collection, "Haloes," imagines a dangerous fire that threatens all the houses in downtown St. John's. After the fire, the protagonist's traumatized house is infested with displaced mice.

The vulnerability of houses mirrors that of human beings and sublime states of emotion — love, fear, jealousy — show characters (and by extension, readers) to be subjects of imperfect control over their world, especially over things that matter to them: lovers, films, mortality, alligators, parents. The sublime moment brings to the forefront of consciousness the permeability of borders, the sometimes unexpected and sudden nature of violence and pain, self-dispossession, and fear. In the passage below, we encounter the painfully intense, disorienting, and terrifying in the love between a little boy, Kevin, and his mother. I quote at length, for its many details cumulatively create intensity and heartbreaking beauty:

The music swelled out and carried down the hill toward the harbour and vibrated in Kevin's chest. There were some women who wore their hair in tight buns below their folded caps and they looked ahead too, just like the men. Then came younger cadets, their blue nylon uniforms whispering loudly as they marched past and he watched them go all the way down Long's Hill, their hands swinging together, sunlight on the polished shoes and his mother swept him up in her arms and kissed his face all over. She kissed him so much he lost his breath....

The sun dropped spears of light through the maple trees that leaned out over Long's Hill, as the wind ruffled the leaves. He needed her to stop, he could not breathe, and

when she did stop she was flushed. Her smile was big and her eyes were pale blue and the blue patches of sky through the leaves above her head were painfully bright.

Then she gripped his head, her hands over his ears, and she looked into his eyes with an intensity that had nothing to do with laughter. It was the kind of intensity that had to do with the horror of her addiction and her struggle against it. He could see a vein in her temple pulsing, her breath smelled of cinnamon gum, her sweater was a pale pink angora and her jeans were acid wash and she wore lip gloss that smelled like watermelon. No one will ever convince him that she did not love him, that she had not always loved him. He was pressed under her knee on the sidewalk, the wind nearly knocked out of him, because she was afraid of losing him (*Alligator* 265-66).

Kevin does not entirely understand this manic maternal affection and certainly does not control its expression. Love is literally breath-taking for this boy. It knocks him to the ground and renders him speechless. There is a tinge of terror in the memory of his mother's "big smile" and the "painfully bright" sky he looks up into, her fear of losing him expressed in her heavy knees upon his small frame. His mother's expression of love is tactile (even attack-tile) and for the most part nonverbal. She perhaps cannot speak, facing as she does a crisis of representation in expressing the vastness of her affection. This world of intense vibration and swelling (a moment where control and order are jeopardized) is all the more salient against the background of marching cadets, with their discipline, regulation, rigidity, and tightness. This (again, dizzying and hyper-realized) encounter between a bewildered boy, one who is to know profound loneliness in his life, and his terrified young mother brings into focus an intensity of emotion that distinguishes all of Moore's fiction. It details the unspeakable horror of losing one's hold on sanity and the fear of losing one's child or being abandoned by one's mother. Indeed, the love between characters in Moore's work is not typically gentle or easygoing, but is often excessive or hard, threatening to overwhelm the person in its grip. In the short story, "Surge," for instance, the love between a mother and her daughter, Giselle, illustrates such pure, rigid intensity: "She and her mother love each other with something as hard and strong as metal scraping metal, something that can produce sparks" (*Degrees of Nakedness* 74). Kevin, too, is powerless in the intense grip of his mother's hands, his vulnerability underscored by his inability to control her illness or the expression of her affections.

In her article, "A Laying on of Hands: Toni Morrison and the Materiality of Love," Anissa Janine Wardi writes that in Morrison's novels, and particularly *The Bluest Eye*, "the power ... rests with the lover, who is active, choosing the expression of love. The beloved are static, incapacitated if not immobilized, by the love itself" (202). In the canons of both Morrison and Moore, love is necessary but also occasionally devastating. But powerlessness in the face of potential annihilation is a means of communion, particularly through touch. Like the African American tradition of "a laying on of hands," a physicality that Wardi designates as the "materi-

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ality” of love, the young mother on this St. John’s street grips Kevin’s head in her hands, a touch frightening but ultimately balming, as this tactile form of connection, along with her intense eye contact, communicates wordlessly and convincingly to Kevin that he is, indeed, loved. Characters in Moore, especially when facing annihilation in their overwhelming emotions, acknowledge, if painfully, their neediness and lack of self-sufficiency.

In the case of the horrific confrontations with the sublime, the experience of living in a vulnerable body can prompt shame. The body’s mortality, fragility, and imperfect physicality become part of what is *not oneself*, a site of disgust and disavowal. In her hyper-realist mode, Moore focuses with meticulous curiosity on abject objects (for example, tangled hair in the sink, “mucous-like eggs,” cold-sore blood mixed with ice cream on a spoon). In *Alligator*, Colleen’s mother has rammed her shopping cart, which holds Colleen, into a woman’s wheelchair. The reader experiences through six-year-old Colleen’s eyes the body of a disabled woman, a presence that throws Colleen into an abject dizziness which, coupled with a stomach virus, causes her to vomit on her fancy coat and new boots in a crowded Christmas Eve Wal-mart:

The woman in the wheelchair was obese. Her body was composed of three distinct rolls of fat that settled on top of each other and made Colleen think of soft-serve ice cream pouring out of the nozzle at Moos Moos. The woman’s shiny red rubberboots didn’t quite reach the footrests and the appliqué Christmas tree on her sweater had green lights that blinked on and off....

Greasy white hair lay flat over her skull. The grooves made by her comb were still visible and the pink of her scalp showed through....

The fear she felt in the mall on that day was magnified by the noise and nascent fever. The Christmas bulbs were swaying, moved by a mysterious internal breeze near the rafters. When she remembers it, she feels the dangerous, oozing seepage, the disintegration of the membrane between adulthood and childhood (*Alligator* 24, 28).

The “oozing seepage” between membranes, the element of intense horror, the childlike dress of an adult woman, her copious flesh — all prompt abject response and constitute the space of the sublime, an excessive grotesque world that overwhelms the subject. Edmund Burke writes of such sublime response: “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime” (39).

But Moore’s characters seem to recognize the value and dignity of doing one’s best, of living in a world of striving and effort after reckless love, a vision, Nussbaum argues, not unlike that of Romantic writer Emily Brontë in *Wuthering Heights*:

[R]edemption is found in the very depth of exposure in erotic effort — redemption from the clutter of everyday life and its superficial cares, which obscure from the self its own true being. In the very extent of the lovers' *exposure to pain and risk in love*, a risk so profound that it courts death, there is the most authentic expression of pure and purified life (592-3).

Moore's fictional personages, unlike Christian or Platonic models, do not seek to shake off the vulnerable mortal body's "exposure to pain and risk in love," but instead, as this discussion has demonstrated, make it the object of delicately analyzed fascination. Love's impulse toward the "pure" (even if it is pure terror), coupled with Moore's highly disciplined hyper-realist attention to detail, renders an intensity to the most mundane moments.

This focus on the vulnerable human body in the midst of sublime terror and joy, constitutes, as many feminist philosophers have argued, an acknowledgment of our vulnerability and that of others. Moore's work, I argue, is a literary model for becoming more compassionate, empathetic people. While Nussbaum argues that the philosophical Stoic "would like to believe that no experience of worldly helplessness can touch us, that we are never victims — and that this is our dignity" (372), Moore takes a different position: strong emotions are a sign that one is human, living in a world where expectations, values, and attachments are fragile and often beyond one's control. A reader who acknowledges such human vulnerability might be less likely to experience shame at one's lack of omnipotence and more likely to embrace those fragile aspects of her own life as well, a befriending of self and other. A character's encounter with otherness — be it Irish winds, North Atlantic waves, a mother's madness, overwhelming love, or a feverish collision with a disabled body — is one means of thereby cultivating compassion. Racism, misogyny, hatred of the other — many of these forms of rage and violence are rooted, Nussbaum argues, "in a narcissistic refusal to tolerate the reality of something different from oneself, especially if it is at the same time a reminder of one's own vulnerability" (345).

Judith Butler, in her recent book, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, insists that a shared national acknowledgement of vulnerability (and here she is discussing aggressive American actions after the exposed national vulnerabilities of 11 September 2001) has the potential to bring about compassionate community formation:

Is there a way that we might struggle for autonomy in many spheres, yet also consider the demands that are imposed upon us by living in a world of beings who are, by definition, physically dependent on one another, physically vulnerable to one another? Is this not another way of imagining community, one in which we are alike only in having this condition separately and so having in common a condition that cannot be thought without difference? This way of imagining community ... [is] one in which we are compelled to take stock of our interdependence. According to this latter view, it would become incumbent on us to consider the place of violence in any such rela-

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tion, for violence is, always, an exploitation of that primary tie, that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves and for one another (27).

A reflection upon community relations is particularly significant in a province that has had to re-narrate itself in economic, demographic, and global terms and reconsider its understanding of community, one not so typically and reliably defined by familial ties, work, or religious affiliation. Moore's intense renderings of love and human relations, often set in a contemporary urban context, draw upon shared knowledge of loss and vulnerability, one's necessary attachment to others, and the risks of exposure to other people, to wind, to frigid water, to unreliable fisheries, and water bed slashing.

I end this discussion with a final observation about Lisa Moore's collisions with the sublime, exemplified by a passage in "Natural Parents." A young man, Lyle, gets contact lenses for the first time and the world becomes astonishingly clear, broken down into its minute, hyper-real elements:

Each leaf distinct from the next, rather than the loose weave of luminous, swimming colour he had always believed a tree to be. His own subjectivity, previously transparent, became opaque. He saw his mother's dark tweed sleeve shot through with minute white seeds, shiny where worn, bristling microscopic hairs of wool. He'd just had time to grasp the sleeve in his fist before he hit the sidewalk. He had fainted (*Open* 81).

Edmund Burke writes that "when we attend to the infinite divisibility of matter ... we become amazed and confounded at the wonders of minuteness" (98-9). But the significant point here is this: before he falls, Lyle reaches out to "grasp the sleeve" of his mother. Filmmaker Madeline speaks her terror to the Spanish truck driver, even if he cannot understand her. David calls home to tell his beloved wife of his vertigo in the Irish winds. Kevin's young mother grips his head and stares into his eyes. The impulse, Moore seems to tell us, despite one's solitary fear in the face of intense disorientation, is to reach for another, to extend oneself outward. And therein lies the most important and humane means of survival in Moore's worlds of strength and "dramatic frailty" (*Open* 114).

Notes

¹The hyper-realist form explains, in part, the occasional despondence Moore's writing may produce in the reader. As Stafford explains, "And perhaps this [the desire for transcendence in the ordinary] tells us something more generally about the category of the hyperreal. Somehow, as the Romantics recognised, it aspires to beyondness, but soon falls to earth. This deflationary trajectory characterises all of the images we have considered" (paragraph 23). It is difficult for the hyper-real to sustain itself.

²Ramazani's claim that such confrontations are "staged" is particularly pertinent to Moore's fiction. In *Alligator*, the characters who thrive at the edges of safety are filmmakers,

actors, liars, and stunt performers — all of whom enjoy an excessive theatricality of self and many of whom view their sublime moments through the lens of film and drama. They enjoy having an audience.

³Freeman writes “words at their most sublime have the force and feel of water” (26).

⁴The sublime quality of Moore’s love is highlighted by the element of risk involved, her female characters’ plunge into consequences unknown. Hitchhiking with strangers, for instance, is a frequent narrative activity (and sometimes the hitchhiking results in near or actual collisions with moose or trucks). Colleen enjoys putting herself in peril, in one case walking, under-age, into a liquor store and leaving without paying for a bottle of vodka. In fact, erotic love itself is a form of risk, as one opens oneself to another valued individual, the movements of whom the lover cannot entirely control.

⁵In her novel *Alligator*, two young adults, Frank and Kevin, sit awkwardly together at Kevin’s kitchen table, awkward because Frank is asking this sometime, almost-acquaintance for a lot of money. But they are also avoiding a shared memory of the deep, irreparable loss of love, the threat of succumbing to the belief that they are essentially unloveable — and the sublime terror that such a shame, like gravity, would pull them down:

They had each felt a binding loneliness as children that they had no word for, nor would they have wanted to have articulated it, if they could, because it was shameful and something they would struggle to avoid acknowledging for the rest of their lives. But each boy had felt the presence of this absence in the other and felt a reciprocal and grim admiration because they had both more or less withstood its gravitational pull (*Alligator* 266).

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