

In memory of my father  
Leslie Joseph De Bolla

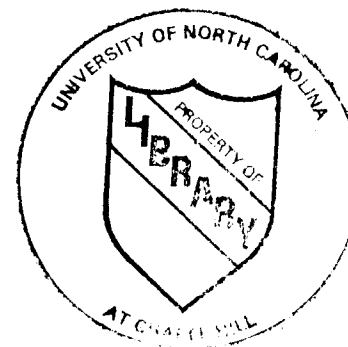
# The Discourse of the Sublime

*Readings in History, Aesthetics  
and the Subject*

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# 1

## Introductory: Towards the Subject

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What was it to be a subject in the eighteenth century? What were the prevailing concepts, the ruling ideologies informing a man's or a woman's conception of self? What determined those informing ideologies of subjectivity, how were they policed? Did the sense of self change over the course of the century, and if it did was that change uniform for all subjects in all places? These are the kinds of question that I hope may be overlaid on the opening fantasy, a cento of strange figurations of the body and the self, jammed together haphazardly in order to give a foretaste of the topics and concerns of this book, and to initiate a sense of what I will term theory's imaginary in its desire to bring the subject back from the past. Perhaps this fantasy scene is too reminiscent of a certain contemporary penchant for the striking example but I hope that the distances between the anecdotal and the *unreal* quality of the opening dream will become apparent very quickly. For, whatever else the force of this opening advertisement might be, its purpose is to problematize its appropriation of the past.

We may begin in earnest by stating the central problematic addressed by this book: there is no 'history' of the 'subject', and there are very few histories of subjects. These terms 'history' and 'subject' are bounded by quotation marks in order to register the difficulty of talking at the most general levels about the subject and history. We need to know first, here, what is meant by a subject and what by history; and, furthermore, we need to investigate the possibility of placing these two terms in close proximity. In what sense can the 'subject' have a history; does the concept of selfhood, individuality, have a narrative history, or, this sense of history and subject being perhaps unlocatable, should all histories of selfhood, in contrast, be grounded in specific subjects? Further, is it possible to speak of the subject without resorting to social, political and cultural description? Can we speak of the self without addressing the history of philosophical and theological enquiry into this concept, at least the history of this concept as it occurs in the West? These questions are addressed to the property of the subject as agent, as that which acts and is acted upon by forces external and occasionally internal to it. They will by and large be ignored throughout this study in favour

of an extremely specific working of the category 'subject'. By this I mean to clarify and make precise what might otherwise become extremely obscure and imprecise: when the term 'subject' is used throughout this book I do not mean to refer to particular subjects, to specific individuals, nor to the subject as an agent within the social, cultural or political, but to a position, a space or an opening within discourse. This location might be labelled 'the subject position' or the 'subject effect'. Both these labels and how I use the term discourse are discussed in detail below.

From this very general standpoint it might be said that every 'age' constructs its own concept of the subject, its own myths of self. For our own time it is clear that any description of the subject which ignores Freud's lifework and Lacan's 'rereading' of it would, to some extent, be very partial. We might note from this, our own late twentieth-century perspective, that the subject 'after Freud' is something else, something other. Yet if we were to begin a history of the subject in this manner, should such a thing be both possible and desirable, it would find itself competing with no more or less power as a descriptive model, with a number of earlier interventions, such as the Cartesian moment, or the Humean enquiry, any or all of which might see themselves as offering grander and more comprehensive accounts of the self. Taken in relation to such 'histories' or narrative accounts of human subjectivity the eighteenth-century 'discovery' or 'rise' of the subject, as it is variously described, is simply one more competing description, one more example of how a particular age 'rediscovered' or reinvented its own sense of self.

To begin here, then, is to begin by registering the daunting scope and size of the field: every age has its own concept of selfhood, and every succeeding 'age' may or may not choose to interpret this concept in its own fashion, and very often in its own self-image. It does not take very long before we arrive at a surfeit of descriptions which, although they may be regarded as primarily and properly historical, tend to be reduced to appropriations of a past age by the powerful operation of our own controlling myths of selfhood. It is very difficult, when we attempt to think the subject historically, to imagine a time that was not as it is now, to appropriate a Miltonic formulation, and this only goes to exacerbate our attempts to clarify the description of a presentist historical sense of human agency, of an historicized subjectivity. It is clear that we are only able to perceive this difficult question from our own historical, cultural and ideological perspectives, and that we are unable to recover the plenitude of the past in order to check, in as much detail and with as much care as possible, our findings and descriptions. To register this, however, is not to relinquish the considerable control and subtlety we may wield in our historical investigations; historical enquiry must constantly measure and monitor its accounts of the past against its own enabling and disabling fictions, and to write as knowingly as possible within those discourses of appropriation, limitation and control.

To return to the opening set of questions, this study begins with the

assumption that the human subject is not the same through history, and that, furthermore, the modern subject, the subject generated in, by and through the age of reason, is the result or product of a particular discursive network not uniquely present to the years 1756–63, but largely initiated and substantiated during this period. To claim this is quite clearly to claim something outrageous, and, by and large, beyond the demonstration and scope of one book, and perhaps beyond the powers of any historical investigation. However, I will make the statement once more, in a slightly expanded form, since it will serve to guide the reader through the following argument which, for reasons set out below, is far from linear, often obscured by detail or distorted by over-simplification, but never simple. The guiding formulation is this: the autonomous subject, a conceptualization of human subjectivity based on the self-determination of the subject and the perception of the uniqueness of every individual, is the product of a set of discourses present to the period 1756–63, the period of the Seven Years War. This set of discourses will be investigated in detail in the first part of the present study which examines how and in what ways two extremely powerful discourses of legislation, what I term the discourse on debt and the discourse on the sublime, generate the discursive milieu within which the autonomous subject becomes apparent. (The terms being used here are deliberately unfocused and guarded since it will take some weight of argument and detail to demonstrate how I conceive of the subject discursively.) I shall argue that it is the combination of these two discourses, on debt and on the sublime, the one producing the rationale for a never-ending inflation of the national debt, the other a powerful mechanism for ever more sublime sensation, which leads to a conceptualization of the subject as the excess or overplus of discourse itself; as the remainder, that which cannot be appropriated or included within the present discursive network of control. On account of this the subject, given that it is always outside the discourses within which it is initially generated, becomes both producer and product of another set of discourses which contextualize and control subjectivity. This central paradox or irresolvable duplicity, that the subject is both producer and product of its own discursive formation, will feature throughout the argument which follows.

The immediate retort to this very bald description of the eighteenth-century rise of the subject might be that such a self-determination of the subject is nothing new, indeed it is present in all descriptions of the self. This can only be dealt with at length in the sequence of chapters which follows. It is enough to note now, at the very outset, that this over-generalized statement will, in the long term, require considerable and sophisticated adjustment, and that its illuminative powers may prove to be very limited; it is, however, the initiating impulse behind, and determining hypothesis of, this study, which ends up complicating the story no end through the interrogation of the limits and limitations implied by it. Here, as a point of departure, it should be noted that I am proposing a history of the subject which is extremely specific, perhaps

distortingly miniaturized, while also offering a myth of origin of enormous proportions. To say that the autonomous subject begins in the period 1756–63 is to risk a great deal, since it begs so many questions and demands so many qualifications that it might appear, at least initially, to have almost no explanatory power. This is, however, the most economical way of introducing the present argument, no matter how crude it may be: it will become considerably more complex and qualified as we progress.

It is useful to note in regard to this overly simplistic point of departure that there are, in fact, various descriptions of the rise of the subject during the eighteenth century in the extant literature which are certainly not very far from the one given above. It has long been held, for example, that the period witnessed the emergence of 'bourgeois individualism', the capitalist entrepreneur, and the dissenting businessman. It has become something of an *idée reçue*, in fact, so that our histories of eighteenth-century life and culture are disfigured by this notion. The following argument will not take issue with these generally dispersed formulations since the present study does not attempt to square its findings with the larger histories of the subject, nor with any wider cultural, social, or political descriptions of the period. In this sense I am not mounting an argument with, or which should be placed within, the domain of academic history writing; indeed many may find it flies in the face of the good sense associated with the proper study of history. It is, however, profoundly, if problematically, historical in its procedures and aims. This, I take it, is almost self-explanatory in all of the chapters following.

It is important, however, to sketch the governing principles at work throughout, since this will make visible the differences between my own conceptualizations of the autonomous subject and those I take to be present to the generally dispersed notions referred to above. The global task addressed in this study is the examination of a discursive network, a phrase I have already used above, and which will occur with great frequency in what follows. What I take this phrase to suggest is this: at any specific historical (by which I mean in shorthand historical, social, political, cultural and ideological, and for economy's sake will refer to throughout as simply 'historical') juncture a discursive network articulates the 'real', it allows and controls the possibilities for representation. This network is made up of a number of discrete discourses, which interact, sometimes without hostility, at others with considerable violence, with each other. The distances and lines of force between specific discourses vary to a great extent, so that a particular discourse present to a specific discursive network may have almost insignificant connections to all the other discourses within the network. This network is historically specific, but it may change, in whole or in part, with great frequency. Alternatively it may be highly resistant to change. Within any discursive network there may be smaller networks which articulate or are active within particular aspects of the larger discursive milieu.

If we make this concrete for a moment it will become clearer. Let us say that

the discursive network present to the beginning of the eighteenth century includes the discrete discourses of theology, ethics, politics, aesthetics, education, gaming, etc. (It will clearly never be possible to complete this list.) Within this network we can see quite easily that theology and ethics are very close, and interpenetrate each other, whereas gaming and education are less likely to have been proximate. (I have given examples of discourses which are, of course, all interconnected, in order to note that even within such a close group it is possible to postulate distances – I could have given a more exaggerated example, such as the non-connection of cookery to politics.)

When we turn to the subject and attempt to locate the discursive network in which it is generated during the eighteenth century we will encounter the difficulty of describing the precise distances or connections discrete discourses have to each other. This is partly because categories such as the subject are more likely to be stretched across a vast array of discrete discourses rather than inhering within any one. In all of the discussion so far it should be clear that I am stressing the 'discursive' to the exclusion of any other descriptions of the individual. This is necessary in order to examine the ways in which the subject is produced by and within discourse, but it is also a methodological strategy which finds little time for speculations concerned with the intentions of particular individuals in the past: I do not find it useful to claim that a particular representation, for example, is the product of one uniquely gifted individual, who grasped the totality of the discursive network present to his or her own time, and moulded it to his or her own ends, forced it to function in the service of his or her own desires. It would seem to me to be obvious that this is one of the roles the concept of the individual plays within the entire network of available discourses, but we should not only question the particular concept of the subject at work here (which is context-specific to our analysis), but also recognize the debilitating force of this kind of description and analysis. For while it may be obvious to privilege the role of the individual, it is also absolutely impossible to make any kind of historical analysis of the aims and intentions of dead persons: historical knowledge is, *de facto*, discursive.

All of this looks like a well-worn, and by now out of date, rebuttal of the 'great men' theory of history. Social historians in England and America, not to mention the historians connected to the French 'Annales' school, have for some considerable time been rewriting the history books from a perspective close to this. Yet one further disclaimer needs to be made, and it concerns my working notion of 'discourse'. It is more than evident that a social historian takes as his or her research material 'discourse' in the widest sense: the researcher goes into the archive, which might be traditionally constructed and include those great or significant 'texts' of the past thought worthy of preservation, or alternatively may be more open and include oral 'texts' and ephemera deemed 'unserious' by some practitioners of the discipline, and recovers portions of the past in order to weave them into a more or less coherent narrative. These 'texts', the recovered

discourses, are the basis for analyses and descriptions of the past, which are coloured by the particular historian's methodology and aims: they are not, however, the basis for my own working notion of discourse.

Another historical enterprise, usually called intellectual history, utilizes a more capacious working notion of 'discourse', in which the discourses for analysis are not taken to be based within any particular text or set of texts: they are presumed to be generally dispersed throughout the particular historical context – in the air as it were – and part of the intellectual historian's task is to sort them out and track them down. Again, although this notion of discourse is certainly closer to my own working method, it is still not quite the same as the concept used throughout this study.

In my sketch of a 'discursive network' above it is apparent that a distinction is being made between a 'discrete discourse' and the network of which it is a part. It is this distinction which enables us to specify in a little more detail the working notion of 'discourse' for the present study. I take it that a discrete discourse both signals its detachment from neighbouring discourses, and is founded upon its own sense of itself as a discrete form. Let us return to the sketch given above of a possible discursive network at the start of the eighteenth century. It is self-evident that politics, ethics, and theology are all interconnected; they are for our own time as much as for any period in the past, indeed our definitions of these things very often require that they be interconnected. Yet to say this is not to claim that the connections are the same, that the distances or lines of force are identical through history. Furthermore, it already supposes that these three kinds of talk, about politics, ethics, and theology can not only be distinguished by us, from our present perspective, but that they could also be distinguished then, within the historical context. We are naturally led to ask from this: what kept politics in the eighteenth century distinct from theology, what allowed or forced it to be articulated within certain limits, what determined its use of neighbouring discourses, what allowed or enabled it to make use of them? For it is clear that while politics is a 'discrete discourse' it is also inextricably caught within the web of associations and interconnections which characterize the entire network. In order to stabilize the discourse for analysis, then, the working method I have used is to isolate a discrete discourse when it appears to operate the principle of exclusion (even though we know that this never was, nor is possible), when it proclaims itself as a discourse on something.

It is for this reason that I have used a distinction between two kinds of discourse: the first, a discourse on something, is to be taken as a discrete discourse, a discourse which is to be read in a highly specific way, within a very well defined context. A discourse on politics, for example, can be located in the eighteenth century by noting those 'texts' which require now, as much as they required then, to be placed within the context of the political. Pitt's 'resignation' speech on 2 October 1761, while it utilizes all manner of discourse, in the simple sense, is clearly a part of the discourse on politics of the period. It is this kind of

discursive form I will refer to as a discrete discourse, here the discourse on politics. Any reading which wanted to take account of this speech in terms of the wider range of discourses both present to it and positioned by it would attempt to describe its affiliations to neighbouring discourses, and produce an analysis which located the discrete discourse within its enabling discursive network.

This discourse on something is to be distinguished from a discourse of something. To return to the above example, the discourse of politics for the eighteenth century (we are using a very large unit here for explanatory purposes; any working analysis would have to be much more specific than this) is made up of a number of discrete discourses, from ethics and theology to duelling, and includes the discourse on politics: it does not, however, demand that it be read as a discrete discourse on something. We will locate the discourse of politics in a very wide range of discursive situations – this is clear from our own sense of the political – but wherever it is found its interconnections with other discrete discourses will be found to be complex and indirect. Furthermore, the discourse of something may well subsume a large number of discrete discourses, so that the discourse of politics, for example, may make the discourse on duelling insignificant to the point where it becomes merely the technical description of the activity, so that political criteria come to be seen as determining the practice of duelling over and above any technical considerations about it. It is this which enables us to claim, should we wish to, that duelling, during the eighteenth century, was a political act not a personal or private one.

This distinction between two types of discourse assume that we are able to identify those discourses which say 'read me like this': it is the burden of the second chapter to demonstrate that this is possible in the realm of eighteenth-century British aesthetics. Furthermore, it requires that the second kind of discourse is not allowed to become all-subsuming, so that the discourse of politics is not seen to be present in every kind of discourse and area of discursive activity. It is in respect to this that the model of a discursive network has been proposed. This allows us to note the interrelations between discrete discourses at a specific time, and in the service of a particular analysis; it allows us to note that the same network might look very different, the connections and distances between discourses may differ enormously, from another perspective, both from our position, and within the historical context. Thus, if we were to begin the task of writing a history of architecture for the period, we might be faced with precisely the same discursive network as that characterized above (although it would be more likely to be different) but in which the connections between discrete discourses not only appear to us to be different, but were also perceived to be different within the historical context. Furthermore, any alteration in the emphasis we give to a particular discrete discourse, even when we maintain our perspective and the general focus of the enquiry, may well alter the lines of force between those discourses which constitute the larger network. I am proposing,

then, an analytical method which stabilizes the network at the point of analysis, but which claims that the resulting topology which is our analysis is no more than one momentarily stabilized account. This method brings a number of distinct advantages over the wider concept of discourse referred to above, since it allows us to note how the discursive network is arranged at any particular time, enabling us to compare it, should we wish to, with another. In this fashion we would be able to note larger-scale connections and changes while maintaining the specificity of both the point of analysis and the discursive network.

It also allows us to notice the self-reflexive nature of the discourse on something, which must identify its neighbouring discourses within the network in order to define its own boundaries: representation, in the simplistic formulation above, is not only made possible by the discourses available, those discourses are also determined by representation. In precisely the same manner the discourse of something is reflected in and by the discourse on something. From time to time I refer to a discursive 'node' as another way of describing the network, hoping to activate a sense which brings to the foreground the impossibility of talking about one strand of a complicated knot without implicating all the other strands. We do attempt to do this, of course, in order to proceed in the task of argumentation and analysis.

These comments about the use of terminology are made in order to forestall possible misunderstandings and to mark the distances between my own working sense of discourse and those found in a number of different contemporary disciplines and enquiries. Perhaps the most obvious acknowledgement I should make in this regard is to the work of Michel Foucault. However, while recognizing that the present work, its aims and structures of argument, would be unthinkable without Foucault, I do wish to maintain a certain distance from that body of work. Although the current book is not in any sustained sense a critique of Foucault's mobilization of various concepts around the discursive – I am thinking here of 'episteme' and 'discursive formation' – there are distinct differences between what I take to be Foucault's use of discourse and its cognates and my own.<sup>1</sup> Thus, where there is a tendency in Foucault's earlier work to stabilize the object of study through the use of the concept 'discursive practice' I have attempted to destabilize all the discursive networks described and analysed in this book. This has been carried out on account of a scepticism which operates not only in respect to what one can uncover or recover from the past, the purported object of historical enquiry, but also in respect to the present point of analysis, to its enabling discursive forms, fictions, fantasies. I take it that these extremely brief and crude remarks concerning the distances between the

<sup>1</sup>Of course a properly sensitive reading here would remark that the work designated under the name of Foucault is not one thing; that it has its own history, that it undergoes transformation across and within various texts and so on. I leave these matters outside the present text for the reasons given within it.

present work and more widely disseminated forms of 'discourse analysis' will suffice since my aims are not polemical or even critical in regard to this question.

If we return to the guiding statement, given above, about the construction of the subject during the years 1756–63, another set of questions can be addressed. This concerns the choice of the period and the 'discrete discourses' discussed below. The first of these, the choice of the period, can be explained as follows. This study began by questioning the presence of a very large number of enquiries written during the eighteenth century on the topic of aesthetics, or more precisely, on the origin and causes of sublime experience. It became clear that not only was this topic extremely widely diffused – one can find it discussed in works of poetry and painting, landscape gardening and music (all of which are very obviously connected by the network of discourses which constituted aesthetics or philosophical criticism for the period) – it also absorbed and transformed a number of neighbouring but distinct areas of enquiry. Thus the topic of the sublime can not only be found in discussions of reading and speaking, of education in general, but also in political speeches and imaginative literature. This tells us something about the very widespread use of the term 'sublime' and its cognates, but it also signals something else, which, I shall argue in the third chapter, enables us to locate the discourse of the sublime.

This discourse, it seems to me, is distinguished from any of its neighbours by the fact that it has, effectively, no boundary. It is a discourse which produces, from within itself, what is habitually termed the category of the sublime and in doing so it becomes a self-transforming discourse. The only way in which it is possible to identify this newly mutated discursive form is via its propensity to produce to excess. This production to excess might be expected as the 'natural' result of a discourse on the sublime: enquiries into the nature and causes of sublime sensation were necessarily led to an investigation of the 'transport' of the sublime experience. The experience was itself defined as one which broke through a boundary, which was, in some sense at least, excessive. Hence the discourse on the sublime, in its function as an analytic discourse on excessive experience, became increasingly preoccupied with the discursive production of the excess: once it had begun to describe how an experience is sublime and what caused it, it began to create a discourse which not only explained the effect or demonstrated the mechanism by which it is produced, but also created the experiential possibility for sublime sensations. There is, then, a natural tendency for the discourse on the sublime to produce the conditions necessary for the construction of the discourse of the sublime, a discourse which produces from within itself sublime experience.

It is on account of this that many enquiries into sublimity turn to external discourses, most notably that of ethics, in order to control the discourse of analysis. I refer to this discourse on the sublime as a discursive analytic in order to distinguish it from the more common use of the word 'discourse' (which is usually taken to mean a spoken utterance, or the distinguishing feature of a

particular text – Burke's discourse, for example, usually refers to the distinct use of language by Burke in a particular text). The discursive analytic, as we shall see, tends to produce its own objects for analysis along with its empowered analysis of them. When it recognizes this it often reaches out for a legislating and controlling adjacent discourse in order to bring itself to law, to avoid its self-generating and excessive productions. Even when it does not recognize this it still keeps itself under control through recourse to a neighbouring legislative discourse. This sketch of aesthetics during the eighteenth century seemed to explain why ethics is nearly always summoned up by early works on the sublime, primarily those published during the first two decades, but it does not explain very adequately why this turn to ethics seems to disappear after the mid-century. Explanations which are founded in the notion that ethics simply became less important during the second half of the century seemed to lack explanatory power.

This led me to consider those works which were published around mid-century in order to investigate the possible reasons for this relatively sudden disappearance of ethics as a contextualizing and controlling discourse for works on the sublime. It is true that there are other explanations of this change in the extant literature, but these nearly always suggest that after mid-century aesthetics became dependent upon, or at least interconnected with and interested in 'psychology'. It is in relation to this argument that the emergence of the self is often claimed as the result, or one of the effects of, the enquiry into the sublime. While it would be false to maintain that aesthetics does not turn to 'psychology' after mid-century, it seems to me that this statement begs a number of very large and important questions. Mid-century aestheticians did not 'invent' psychology out of thin air, nor is the turn to it as a contextualizing discourse self-evident: a number of more powerful legislating discourses were already present, such as theology, whose neglect in this respect cannot be explained by merely intoning the argument, more often an unexamined assumption than a contextualized analysis, about the decrease in interest and power of the orthodox church in mid-eighteenth-century England. It is a matter of contemporary debate as to the extent of this falling away of the power of the church, but such arguments need not concern us at present since it is clear that enquiries into the sublime recognized the option of turning to theology and rejected it (we will see how Burke tackles this problem in the third chapter).

The turn to psychology, then, needs to be explained from within the discourse on the sublime, and from within its contextualizing discursive network. On account of this it became clear that the three major works of aesthetics published between 1757 and 1763, Burke's *Enquiry*, Gerard's *Essay on Taste*, and Kames's *Elements of criticism*, effect this transition from a discourse on the sublime which genuflects towards ethics to one which helps produce, as much as it turns towards, psychology. The precise dates of this transition are not at issue – they are merely given as a convenient way of delimiting the period – but it also

transpires that these three texts were published during the Seven Years War; indeed they almost exactly correspond to its beginning and its end. In order to contextualize these works and to begin noting the distances between the discourse on the sublime and its neighbouring discourses, I turned, therefore, to those issues and debates which seemed to me to be very obviously of major importance and significance for the period, and which constituted one of the most powerful discourses within the network: the set of discourses on, about, and raised by the war. It was here that a number of extremely interesting connections began to emerge, but which only became visible by working the model of discourse and discursive network outlined above. For, it became clear very early on that the debates about the war, and most importantly the debt occasioned by it, hardly borrowed the same terms of argument or details of analysis, in fact hardly borrowed a phrase or a figure from works on aesthetics. Thus, it was evident from the beginning that it would be foolish to look for or suggest that the connections between these two distinct discourses were causal in any simple sense, yet the similarities between them when understood as discrete discourses are certainly apparent and, it seemed to me, of considerable importance. To put this as baldly as possible, both the discourse on the sublime and the discourse on the national debt during the Seven Years War ran into a problem of immense scale and importance which becomes legible when we see these discussions as legislative discourses. This problem was conceived as the following: how can one control a discourse which sets out to examine the ways and means for controlling an excess, the sublime experience in the case of one and the national debt in the other, when that excess is visualized by the discourse of analysis as its own product?

It is this question which forces the discourse on the sublime to a recognition of its own productive powers, and which does not so much turn to psychology as produce the object for it: it produces the autonomous subject. But, as noted above, this turn in aesthetics occurs at precisely the same time as the discourse on debt discovers that it not only helps produce the conditions under which the debt increases at an alarming and uncontrollable rate, but that it also requires an identification between the individuals who constitute the state and the debt which represents it; at precisely the same moment the discourse on debt turns to and produces the individual, the autonomous subject. In the fourth chapter this identification is described in some detail through an examination of numerous tracts on the debt; the characteristics of that debate are of less interest to the present argument than the discursive forms in which they are featured, and the overwhelming tendency to rationalize an ever-expanding debt in terms first of an oppressive and then a familiarized, and therefore defused, unlegislable excess. The discourse on the debt effects the capitalist description of the subject – still very much with us and under which we are represented – in which the discursive excess is identified as the mark of individuality; it brings about the field of representation in which difference determines and ratifies person; difference

in and to excess becomes the defining feature of the individual and sanctions the subject. It is not possible, or desirable, to stretch this argument any further; to claim, for instance, that the discourse on the debt required a model for the containment of the excess which could be found, very conveniently, in the discourse on the sublime; nor to claim the opposite, that the discourse on the sublime required the example of the identification of the subject with the determining discourse of analysis provided by the discourse on debt. It is important to note that a causal relation would be impossible to locate, given that the very connections between these two discourses have only come to light on account of the procedures and protocols utilized in my analysis; exactly those methodologies developed in order to take account of the non-commensurability of these two areas of enquiry, their non-causative connections. The final turn of my argument will address this and attempt to investigate its own excess and the relation between the sublime and debt as these categories are used in the following discussion. We will need, however, to examine the detail of these discourses and of the subject as it is positioned by the discursive excess before being able to take full measure of the sceptical force of this method and these comments.

To return to the matter of the first part of the book, one thing which does emerge with some clarity is that by the end of the war the autonomous subject was not only required by two extremely prevalent discourses, but that it was to some extent the product of both of them, even though each required the subject for different ends. More important than this, though, is the contemporary recognition of a particular discursive analytic, which, in the terminology I am using, produces from within itself its own excess. This excess can be identified with the subject in the years following the war, and is the topic for the second part of this study. I do not mean to suggest that the subject is only present to the areas of enquiry investigated in each of the three main chapters of the second part. Rather, I have set out to examine how the subject is produced within those areas, given that all three – discussions on speaking, viewing pictures, and reading – seem to need or produce a legislative discourse which controls the excess, a discourse of control on the subject.

In this second part of the book a further set of questions takes on considerable importance: how and in what manner does a discourse legislate a practice? What is the relation between a 'theory', even if not entirely understood or recognized as such, and its presumed 'practice'? Here the specificity of the present analysis becomes extremely important, for I do not mean to present an analysis of the eighteenth-century context as if it were innocent in regard to our own legislative theories and policed practices. That this is a large project, if not a utopian dream, is more than clear to me; the reasons for the development of the present study, however, have been determined to a large extent by my belief that at the present time we lack a specifically historical method of understanding discursive transformations, and it is my wager that such a method will enlighten an

understanding of our own contemporary hierarchies and technologies of subjectivity. I have attempted to describe how those hierarchies and technologies were articulated within the past in order to reflect upon the present, in order to demonstrate how the past looks from our present discursive network, and to suggest some ways of re-inscribing that history within our contemporaneity, by which I do not mean that we can learn from history but that we can discover something about the present through history writing. Consequently, when I consider a wide range of texts on the teaching and practice of reading published during the second half of the century I am less concerned with the 'realities' of that practice, as to whether or not men or women read in the ways I suggest they did, than in the statements made about the practice by reading 'theory'. I term these texts 'theoretical' in the full knowledge that they did not call themselves this (it should be noted, however, that the works on perspective dealt with in chapter 8 very frequently did call attention to both the distinction between theory and practice, and their claims to theoretical status), in order to place the relations between the practice of reading, as far as we can discover it, and the texts about the practice in a particular framework. This framework is, put very simply, one in which a text attempts to legislate or police a practice. It does not concern me whether or not women really did read trash novels, but that (usually male) theorists claimed that they did. It is only when we begin to question the relations between this 'theory' and the practice it purports to describe and police that it becomes possible to note that the 'real' may well have been constituted rather differently, and that men, not women, made up the majority of the trash novel reading public. It should be pointed out here, however, that I do not see this as a better version of the past, as a more accurate description of the reading public during the eighteenth century since a further question needs to be addressed concerning the status of that 'real' in the above sentence. For, having noted that reading theory constructed a 'real' in which women read licentious texts only to veil a further 'reality' that in fact men read these books, we need to consider the problem by which 'theory' represented to itself a situation, be it real or imaginary, in which male readers could or did read trash novels. In other words, we have not revealed a more accurate 'real' but have, rather, exposed one of the mechanisms by which reading theory imagined its real, produced its fantasy 'truth'. What is of interest and importance here is the means by which it became possible to allow reading theory to articulate this imaginary, to speak and visualize, perform and place in the frame of the gaze its powers of control and legislation. In all this it would seem to be clear enough that this 'insight' has been enabled by the framework of analysis in which the relationships between a theory and a practice are brought into tension and investigated.

Yet this does not exhaust the determining criteria of the analytical framework, for one possible description of the object (the reading public during the eighteenth century) takes the relations between theory and practice at face

value, just as it takes the contemporary eighteenth-century descriptions of the reading activity as an accurate record of the practice, a picture of the real. In chapter 10 I argue that while such readings are possible a more complex way of relating the descriptions of the activity to the theory leads to a greater understanding of the theory, and a fuller description of its relation to the practice. The object for our analysis, then, is clearly not the past, but the interconnections between two discourses, historically distinct but contaminated by the present of analysis, and their participation within the larger network of the discourses informing, controlling, enabling and requiring the subject.

This, then, is the topic for the second part of the book, which does not attempt to make causal connections between the discourse of the sublime and theories of speaking, viewing and reading. Once again, it seems to me that if the model I am proposing is to produce new insights into the contextualization of discourses such illumination will not come from a redrawn causative description of the relations between discrete discourses. To end up arguing that the discourse of the sublime pervades every discourse in the years following the war, that it is the mark of the subject for the second half of the century, would have been, in very obvious ways, deeply satisfying; unfortunately it would also have been unresponsive to what I take as the full force of a sceptical historical method since it would have reimposed the enabling criteria on the material brought to light by the analysis. In contrast, I have attempted to demonstrate that with a more flexible procedure for analysing historically determined discourses it becomes possible to note connections and overlaps at the constitutive level of the discourse. In this way the discourse of the sublime can be seen as one of the discourses present to the network which defines and enables the subject at a particular moment during the eighteenth century, and when seen from a particular perspective. It is, of course, as important that this perspective tells us as much about our present needs and desires in relation to the analytical procedures and protocols of historical enquiry as about the emergence of subjectivity during the eighteenth century in England.

At this point it is important to register something about the ways in which I use the term subject, and what I take to be the object of my own descriptions. This introduction has already made the point that the subject is taken as a feature of discourse throughout this study. Some further comments about this may delay possible misappropriations of the material presented. The construction of subjectivity, or person, will be investigated entirely in terms of the positions given it, the places it occupies and in which it appears in various discourses. In this way I hope to be able to demonstrate that the subject can be taken as a facet of or a counter within particular discourses as well as a term or concept stretched across a specific discursive network. It is clearly a partial description of subjectivity and is not to be taken as definitive.

This means that the subject as we might more readily understand the term, as the agent of action, the intending user of discourse has been ignored and to



some extent disfigured by my analysis. Subjects in the eighteenth century, it might be remarked, do not appear as positionalities in discrete discourses, are not identified with the excess of any discursive analytic. They do things, they eat and drink and speak and so forth; they are organized into a set of social relations, class relations and political relations. Furthermore, the subject, it might justly be retorted, stands for and means different things dependent upon where a particular subject is located within these hierarchies, whether or not it is male or female, old or young, noble or peasant. While this commonsense objection needs to be addressed if we are to mount a comprehensive history of the concept of subjectivity it does not bear upon the present study, at least in so far as its prefigurative modes of argument are ranged.

The initiating perception of this argument begins by noting that while 'real' subjects are the agents of a history of event, as well of discourse, the historical investigation of their actions and speech is predicated upon the assumption that to be a subject, within the space demarcated for it, was the same for the historical period of enquiry as for our own contemporaneity. This study sets out to investigate that assumption and to construct a set of possible subject positions for the eighteenth century.

Another way of describing this is to note that the subject in our terms functions as trope of history and in history, it organizes both the discourses within this book, and the discursive network within the eighteenth century I set out to examine. The subject as figure works through the text in complicated ways, generating a kind of metaphoric of the subject which is only ever offered as a defigurative reading of the historical context. Something of its power can be noted in the opening dream and the three short chapters in Part II. I should also add that it is more than clear to me, at least, that the discursive network discussed in this book is restricted; it neglects a very large number of discrete discourses ranged into further networks which all singly and in conjunction positioned the subject differently. Further work might look to the discourses of politics and medicine or the institutions of the family and the state in order to supplement the descriptions offered here. This might lead to further figurative emplotments of the body and the subject, to investigations of the body physiognomic, legal, penal and so forth. Such extensions of the current argument might tackle the question of 'who speaks, views, reads' in slightly different ways, taking the perspective from the agent and insisting on the class, gender, economic affiliations of the 'real' person. The last two chapters engage this elaboration in ways that are, I hope, genuinely responsive to the sceptical force of the entire argument.

In order to distance my working of the term subject from its more commonsense use I have resorted to the cumbersome composite 'subject effect' or 'subject position' when the sense of the discursive description of the subject seems to need reinforcement. I have not used this rather awkward term throughout since it can from now on be taken to be the meaning I attach to the

term 'subject'; this has the happy effect of minimizing the distraction of neologism or unnecessary technical vocabulary. It should be pointed out that the effects of this delimitation are discussed in the final chapter, with, I hope, both productive results and scrupulous self-criticism.

The above could be said to be an excursus on the theory of the present work; a few comments about its practice may provide some help in the assembly of its multiple parts. While the above comments point out the large-scale orientation of the following pages they may leave the reader with no real guide for locating and following the precise arguments contained within, especially given the fact that at least three different arguments are energized, to differing degrees, at the same time. These three arguments can be set out plainly here, for they will never be so baldly and unproblematically extractable from the detail of comments in the chapters following. The first argument, clearly attached to the comments about the theory of the present work above, concerns the nature of a discourse of something, and the methods and procedures we might use in order to investigate a specifically historical discursive network. In regard to this argument it is clear that my distinction between a discourse on something and one of something is a hard concept, by which I mean to refer to the absolute distinctions it sets up between two forms of discursivity. Such hard concepts usually distort the 'reality' of which they conceive; such is the case here, for the utilization of this hard concept orders the discursive network in a particularly rigid fashion, thereby eliding or erasing the softer connections between and within discourses highlighted by other weaker descriptive concepts and methodologies. The reason why I stick to this otherwise brutal analytical tool is to bring into focus the production of an excess by the discourse of something. A large portion of Part I of the book is concerned with the description and analysis of eighteenth-century aesthetics exclusively from this perspective and in the service of this argument.

The second argument pursued throughout, and clearly enabled by the first, concerns the emergence of the subject, understood in the terms set out above, within a small number of discourses during the eighteenth century in England. Here the restricted historical period features as a control upon the argument, which in its hardest form (although never invoked) leads to a description of the emergence of the subject entirely in terms of the discursive network present to the period of the Seven Years War. This argument is also connected to the first through the analysis of the discursive excess, since, although I do not wish to make an identity between the excess and the subject, in some respects it is useful to regard the subject as precisely the result or overplus of a discourse of something, and hence adjacent to the discursive excess. It would have been possible to attach other names to this excess, and to sketch in some detail the particular excesses produced by debt or by aesthetics. I have not pursued this line of enquiry because the argument is concerned with the *mechanism* by which a

discourse produces an excess; the reasons for this should be clear from the perspective of the first argument outlined above – I am less interested in what the excess might be, in giving it a name, than in the investigation of discursive propensity to produce excess.

This brings into focus the third argument which concerns the relations between theory and practice, and the difficulties a discourse of something has with an excess which it produces but which it cannot control. In Part II of the book three areas of enquiry are examined in which the relations between theory and practice are various. These three arguments are, then, interconnected at this most general level, but they are certainly not connected, at least in so far as I see the situation, in a set of causal or even logical connections in the detail of the various chapters. Discourse, subject and theory are all part of my discursive network, and are the major controlling concepts at work in my analytical procedures; they are, however, more rhetorically than logically linked, if rhetoric is taken as the prefigurative determinant of a language. This leads to my attempting to say at least three things at the same time, clearly an impossible feat, and because of this the reader may be in some confusion at times as to which of the three controlling arguments is being pursued, and to sense something of a high-wire act in process. The success of this balancing can only be judged by the reader, as can the results of it set out in the conclusion.

As if this three-dimensional argument were not already too unwieldy and impractical one further difficulty must be addressed, the connection between the three parts of the book. I hope that it is clear from these introductory remarks that the connections between the first and the second parts of this book are indirect; they follow, in so far as they can, the complex interweaving of a discursive network, tracing some dominant figures, such as the body, across different discursive fields while resisting a causal description of their relations. This can be seen as the resistance internal to my own theory and expectations of analysis.

Part I attempts to isolate a discourse of the sublime in terms of the functions of what I have termed above a discursive analytic. It attempts to argue that works on the topic of sublime sensation, when seen as such a discursive analytic, write out another set of issues concerned with the question of closure as it is posed to the analytic discourse itself. Chapter 2 traces the ways in which the eighteenth-century discussion of the sublime became an auto-legislative discourse, turning away from the modes of authentication found in prior discursive forms, such as ethics or theology, and in so doing noting how it became a legislative discourse about the objects it takes for, and as examples of, analysis. In common with most examples of legislative discourses the discourse on the sublime is very restrictive in respect to the objects it positions as the focus of its descriptive, analytic and legislative work. In brief, eighteenth-century aesthetics can be understood as constructing a description of sublimity which restricts the types and forms of experience that are held to be generative of sublime sensation. In chapter 3 the

difference between the discourse on the sublime and what I term the discourse of the sublime is described from the standpoint of the adequacy of a discourse to set a perimeter within which its legislating and legitimating manoeuvres can be seen to be effective.

It is also suggested that this mutation of eighteenth-century enquiries into the sublime could be placed in a historically specific discursive context. Thus the legislative discourse of the sublime is placed next to a concurrent set of enquiries about the national debt during the course of the Seven Years War in chapter 4. Here I suggest that these enquiries also generate a discourse which examines its own limits of description and analysis, and which also produce from within, that is discursively, an excess which was the mark of the discourse's legislative limit. The excess for these works is to be seen in terms of the identification of the individual or subject with certain institutional descriptions and functions of the state or nation. In the juxtaposition of these two chapters I hope to show that similar methods and ways of producing this excess are articulated by the discourse of debt and the discourse of the sublime – while taking care to note that the subject produced by these two discourses is not necessarily the same, serving similar ends and needs.

In the second part of this book attention moves to focus on how the subject is also the product of a number of related enquiries, which again produce, require and examine subjectivity for differing reasons. In this second set of discourses the excess of the first part is seen more insistently in terms of the overplus of theory over practice. Here it is taken as axiomatic that a theory legislates a practice, and that it *produces* the activities over which it rules. Theory in this account does not set out to describe or codify a practice, it is not an empirically based operation, although it may present itself as such, but a generative system which requires a practice, produced by the system, in order to function. Three kinds of theoretical discourse are discussed in Part II all of which identify the subject as the overplus of the theory/practice division.

In works on elocution discussed in chapter 6 the political subject represented by the voice that emanates from the body and the gestures surrounding the physical space of it is seen to be policed by a theory of public speech which determined a practice in the social that was carefully measured and distanced. This practice, which we should note does not have a privileged relation to the 'real' of eighteenth-century social space, nor does it describe that 'real' in anything like 'objective' terms, is founded upon a set of principles, most easily given under the rubric of propriety and property, which legislate the social space of the subject; they determine how and why and where a body should be displayed, the precise manner in which it should move and occupy physical space.

In works on perspective drawing discussed in chapter 8 the theoretical discourse performs a slightly different task and has a slightly different status. Here the theory clearly does not *produce* the practice; indeed, as we shall see, its

almost total lack of transformation through the entire century suggests that its own version of the practice of viewing was almost entirely phantasmatic. In this way perspective theory can be seen as a very weak form of legislative discourse, attaining a very small degree of penetration into its surrounding discursive network. Its work was to repeatedly state a set of rules which determine the distance of the subject, and to articulate a certain ethics or politics of viewing against an unruly social practice. Something different again will be found to be the case in the relations between the theory and practice of reading outlined in chapter 10. Here, I shall argue that the theory produced an imaginary practice in order to disguise the 'real' of the reading scene; it does this by legislating the reading of texts across the bar of gender, in so doing cleaving the textual into gender-defined categories. The deployment of theory in this case is both more effective and more obviously required; effective since the theoretical distinction between masculine and feminine kinds of text and practices of reading both produced a myth of considerable proportions about the 'real' of reading, a myth that theory told itself again and again, and required by a very extensive change in the composition of the reading public, and in the aims, needs and desires of readers.

This last case is the most complex since the practice imagined by the theory and required by it in order for it to be seen as a legislative discourse, is inserted within the 'real' in contradictory ways. We might almost say that the theory/practice division itself helped change the wider set of relations articulated by reading theory – society, sexuality and the subject – since this hard concept instituted a number of binary divisions which were increasingly taken as *a priori* distinctions in the real. This is a complication which has arisen on account of the distinction being made here between a 'real' of history, that which we cannot recover but to which we gesture as an authenticating move, and the real of the practice positioned by a theoretical discourse.

A potential misconception about the argument I am making in regard to the subject should be defused here. I do not wish to argue in the sequence of chapters in the second part of this book that the subject can *only* be found in theories of speaking, viewing, and reading in the years following the Seven Years War: I do not wish to make a crude kind of Foucaultian argument about the break in discursive orders occasioned by the war and its surrounding debates on debt management. Rather, I wish to pursue the logic of the restrictive historical argument set out above, and to test its limits. This is done in three distinct ways in the three chapters. It is only in the chapter on elocution where the 'rupture' or break argument has any force, since it would appear that at least in works on elocution things do change after the somewhat arbitrary date of the end of the war. This restrictive reading is deliberately destroyed, however, in the chapter on perspective, where I point out that perspective theory *remained the same* for an entire century. The subject, in so far as it is positioned by perspective theory, is clearly *not* a unique product of the mid-century. The purpose of this chapter,

however, is to examine a discursive node, about and/or organized around perspective theory, which would seem to have been highly resistant to change, and almost oblivious to the larger social, cultural and political events that determined its historical specificity.

In the same way and directed towards a similar self-investigative mode of argument, the last example, that of reading theory, breaks down a further enabling assumption of the larger argument of this book, that of the discrete discourse, and attempts to discuss a set of prescriptive comments about the practice of reading in a wide range of texts, all loosely connected with education, without regard to chronology. The argument here covers the entire century and beyond, and attempts to put into question the procedures by which a discrete discourse is isolated in order to note its connections with its neighbours. These three chapters, then, are intended to interrogate my own methods and practices of historicizing the discourse of the sublime.

In all these ways the second part of the book is to be taken as an investigation of the results of the first. There it is suggested that the discourse on the sublime and on the debt both point towards the generation of the subject from within two specific discursive analytics. This is historicized in a very narrow way by restricting the materials placed in apposition to the period of the Seven Years War. Having arrived at a description of the subject in terms of a discursive excess the second part of the book attempts to defigure this analysis. In an important sense the subject figures the discussion in chapters 5 – 10, it informs the gaze of the enquiry, it determines what is looked at and how. In the ways suggested above the sceptical frame of my analytic procedures now becomes important as the figure of the subject is played out across the topics of reading, viewing and speaking only to be subjected to rigorous defiguration. It is only by folding back within the discursive analytic that which is produced by it – here, the discursive excess identified as the subject position – that it becomes possible to investigate the presuppositions and prefigurations of my argument. It is this method I take to be exemplified by the appositional and tmetic placing of the second part of the book.

It should also be noted that the methodology is itself cumulative; this is to say that the argument is not cumulative but the process of it, the means by which it is exemplified and prosecuted. In Part III a return to the sublime is effected via an interrogation of the everted boundary which frames the entire study. In this way the conclusion stages its own reading in order to examine how the subject is inserted within the boundaries of this discursive analytic, and, I hope, on account of this is more knowing about its own horizon, its own speaking seeing, its own trajectory and its own excess.