

On the Sublime*

(Toward the Further Development
of Some Kantian Ideas)

We call an object *sublime* if, whenever the object is presented or represented, our sensuous nature feels its limits, but our rational nature feels its superiority, its freedom from limits. Thus, we come up short against a sublime object *physically*, but we elevate ourselves above it *morally*, namely, through ideas.

Only as sensuous beings are we dependent; as rational beings we are free.

A sublime subject matter gives us *in the first place* a feeling of our dependency as natural beings, because *in the second place* it makes us aware of the independence that, as rational beings, we assert over nature, as much *inside* as *outside* ourselves.

We are dependent insofar as something *outside* us contains the reason why something is possible *inside* us.

As long as nature outside us conforms to conditions under which something becomes possible inside us, we cannot feel our dependency. If we are to become conscious of that dependency, then nature must be represented as conflicting with what for us is a *need* and yet is *possible* only through nature's compliance. Or, in other

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words, nature must stand in contradiction to our instincts or drives [*Triebe*].

Now all instincts at work within us as sensuous beings may be reduced to two fundamental instincts. First, we possess an instinct to alter the condition we find ourselves in, to express our existence, to be effective, all of which amount to acquiring representations or notions for ourselves. This fundamental instinct can thus be called "the instinct to represent things to ourselves" or, in short, "the cognitive instinct" [*Vorstellungstrieb*]. Second, we possess an instinct to maintain the condition we find ourselves in, to continue our existence, an instinct called "the instinct for self-preservation" [*Trieb der Selbsterhaltung*].

The cognitive instinct concerns knowing; the instinct for self-preservation concerns feelings, in other words, inner perceptions of existence. [172]

By virtue of these two sorts of instincts we are *dependent* upon nature in two ways. The first kind of dependence becomes evident to us if the natural conditions for arriving at various sorts of knowledge are missing. We experience the second kind of dependency when nature contradicts the conditions that make it possible for us to continue to exist. In a parallel way, with the help of reason, we maintain our *independence* from nature in two senses: *first*, because (in a theoretical sense) we pass beyond natural conditions and can *think* more than we know; *second*, because (in a practical sense) we set ourselves above natural conditions and, by means of our will, can contradict our *desires*. When perception of some subject matter allows us to experience the former, it is *theoretically magnificent*, something cognitively sublime. A subject matter providing us with the feeling of the independence of our will is *practically magnificent*, a sublimeness of character [*ein Erhabenes der Gesinnung*].

In the case of what is theoretically-sublime, the cognitive instinct is contradicted by nature as an *object of knowledge*. In the case of what is practically-sublime, the instinct to preserve ourselves is contradicted by nature as an *object of feeling*. In the former scenario nature is considered merely as an object that should have expanded our knowledge; in the latter case it is represented as a power that can determine *our* own condition. Kant accordingly names the practically-sublime "the sublimity of power" or "the

dynamically sublime" in contrast to the mathematically sublime. However, since it is in no way possible on the basis of the concepts *dynamic* and *mathematical* to make clear or not whether the sphere of the sublime is exhausted by this division, I have preferred the division into the *theoretically-sublime* and the *practically-sublime*.

In what way we are dependent upon natural conditions in our cognitions and become conscious of this dependency will be sufficiently elaborated in the development of the theoretically-sublime. That our existence as sensuous beings is dependent upon natural conditions outside us is scarcely in need of a proof of its own. As soon as nature outside us alters its specific relationship to us, on which our physical well-being is based, our [173] existence in the world afforded by the senses and connected to this physical well-being is also immediately challenged and endangered. Nature thus has in its power the conditions under which we exist and, in order that we pay attention to this relationship to nature, so indispensable to our existence, a vigilant sentry has been given to our physical life in the form of the *self-preservation instinct* and a warning has been given to this instinct in the form of *pain*. Thus, the moment our physical condition undergoes a change that threatens to transform it into its opposite, pain calls attention to the danger and summons the instinct of self-preservation to resist.

If the danger is of *the sort* that any resistance on our part would be futile, then *fear* must arise. Hence, if the existence of an object conflicts with the conditions of our own existence and if we do not feel ourselves up to its power, it is an object of fear, something *frightening*.

But it is only frightening for us as sensuous beings, because only as such are we dependent upon nature. That inside us that is not nature and not subordinated to natural law has nothing to fear from nature outside us, considered as a force. Represented as a force capable of determining our physical condition but having no power over our will, nature is *dynamically* or *practically* sublime.

The practically-sublime thus is distinct from the theoretically-sublime in that the former conflicts with the conditions of our existence, while the theoretically-sublime conflicts only with the conditions of knowledge. An object is theoretically-sublime insofar as it brings with it the notion [*Vorstellung*] of infinity, something the imagination does not feel itself capable of depicting. An object

is practically-sublime insofar as it brings with it the notion of a danger that we do not feel ourselves capable of overcoming with our physical powers. We succumb in the attempt to grasp the idea [*Vorstellung*] of the theoretically-sublime or to resist the force of the practically-sublime. A peaceful ocean is an example of the former, a stormy ocean an example of the latter. An enormously high tower or mountain can provide something sublime for cognition. If it looms down over [174] us, it will turn into something sublime for our emotional state. Again, both have this much in common with one another: precisely by contradicting the conditions of our existing and acting respectively, they disclose the very power within us that does not feel itself bound to these conditions, that is to say, a power that, on the one hand, is able to think more than the senses can apprehend and, on the other hand, fears nothing as far as its independence is concerned and suffers no violence in expressing itself, even if the senses accompanying it should be overcome by the frightful power of nature.

Yet, although both sorts of sublimity have a similar relation to our power of reason, they stand in a completely different relation to the sensuous side of us, and this is the basis for an important difference between them, a difference in strength as well as interest.

The theoretically-sublime contradicts the cognitive instinct, the practically-sublime the preservation instinct. In the first case what is contested is only an individual expression of the cognitive power of the senses. In the second case, however, what is contested is the ultimate basis of any possible expression of this power, namely, its very existence.

Now, of course, there is some displeasure involved in every failed attempt to know, since by this means an active instinct is confounded. Yet this displeasure can never amount to pain as long as we know that our existence is not dependent on the success or failure of such knowing and our self-respect does not suffer in the process.

However, if an object clashes with the conditions of our existence and the immediate sensation of it would cause *pain*, the image of the object inspires *fright*. For, in order to preserve the power itself, nature would have had to make arrangements completely different from those that it found necessary to sustain the activity of that power. In the case of a *frightful* object, then, the sensuous

side of our nature is engaged in a quite different way than it is in the case of something infinite, since the self-preservation instinct clamors much more loudly than the cognitive instinct does. It is altogether different whether we have to fear losing a single notion or the basis of any possible notion, namely, our existence in the world of the senses, [175] in other words, whether we have to fear for existence itself or for a single expression of it.

However, precisely for this reason, namely, because the *frightful* object assails our sensuous nature more violently than something *infinite* does, the distance between capabilities of the senses and capabilities that go beyond the senses is felt all the more keenly. Reason's superiority and the mind's inner freedom become all the more conspicuous. Since, then, the entire essence of the sublime rests upon the consciousness of this rational freedom of ours, and all pleasure afforded by the sublime is grounded precisely in this consciousness alone, it follows of itself (as experience also teaches) that the aesthetic image of what is *frightful* must stir us more powerfully and more pleasantly than the representation of the *infinite* does, and that the practically-sublime has, accordingly, a very great advantage over the theoretically-sublime, as far as the strength of the feeling is concerned.

While what is theoretically-magnificent actually expands only our *scope*, what is practically-magnificent, the dynamically-sublime, expands our *power*. Only by means of the latter do we really experience our true and complete independence from *nature*. For feeling oneself to be independent of natural conditions in the mere act of knowing and in one's entire inward existence is completely different from feeling oneself to be transported and elevated to a point beyond fate, beyond all contingencies, and beyond all natural necessity. Nothing matters more to a human being as a sensuous being than his existence, and no dependency is more oppressive to him than this, to regard nature as the very power reigning over his existence. He feels himself free of this dependency when he is witness to the practically-sublime. "The irresistible power of nature," Kant says, "of course provides us, regarded as sensuous beings, with the knowledge of our impotence; but at the same time it uncovers in us a capacity to judge ourselves independently of nature, and a superiority over nature. This superiority grounds a self-preservation of a sort completely different from the kind that can

be contested by nature outside us and endangered—in this process the *humanity* in our person remains unvanquished, although the *human being* would have to succumb to that power of nature. In this way," he continues, "the frightful power of nature is judged aesthetically [176] by us to be sublime, because it calls up in us a power of ours, that is not of nature, to regard as *trivial* everything for which we are concerned as sensuous beings: goods, health, and life. Hence, too, for ourselves and for our existence as persons, we consider that might of nature—to which, of course, we are subject as far as those goods are concerned—no power to which we would have to submit ourselves when it comes to the question of our supreme principles and maintaining or forsaking them. Therefore," he concludes, "nature here is called 'sublime' because it elevates the imagination to the portrayal of those very instances, in which the mind can render itself capable of feeling the unique sublimity of its own calling."

This sublimity of our rational character—this, our practical independence from nature, must, indeed, be distinguished from the sort of superiority that we know how to assert over nature as a power in individual instances, owing to either our physical or our intellectual powers. There is, of course, also something magnificent, but not at all sublime about this latter sort of superiority in itself. For example, a human being who struggles with a wild animal and subdues it by the strength of his arm or even by cunning; a raging river like the Nile whose power is broken by dams, and which the human intellect, by gathering its overflow in canals, can even transform from a destructive object into a useful one; a ship at sea that by its ingenious design is in a position to defy all the violence of the furious elements; in short, all those cases where by means of his inventive intellect the human being has forced nature to obey him and to serve his aims, even where nature is superior to him as a power and equipped to bring about his demise. All these cases, I say, do not awaken a feeling of the sublime, although they have something analogous to it and for that reason, in the aesthetic evaluation, are also pleasing. Yet why are they not sublime, given the fact that they make evident the superiority of humans over nature?

To answer this question we must return to the concept of the sublime, where the reason may be easily uncovered. According to

this concept, the only sublime object is the object that is superior to us [177] as *natural beings*, but from which we feel ourselves absolutely independent as rational beings, as beings not belonging to nature. Thus, on the basis of this conception, all *natural means* employed by human beings to withstand the power of nature are *excluded* from the category of the sublime. For this concept demands unconditionally that as natural beings we be no match for the object, and yet feel ourselves to be independent of it, owing to what in us is not of nature (and this is nothing other than pure reason). However, all those means cited, through which the human being is superior to nature (skillfulness, cunning, and physical strength), are taken from nature and hence they belong to the human being as a natural being. Accordingly, it is not as an intelligent being but as a sensuous being that a human being withstands those natural objects, that is to say, not morally through his inner freedom, but physically through application of natural forces. Also, it is not because he is an intelligent being that he is not overcome by these objects, but rather because as a sensuous being he is already superior to them. Yet where his physical powers are sufficient, there is nothing that could force him to have recourse to his intellectual self, to the inner self-sufficiency of his rational powers.

Therefore, for the feeling of the sublime it is absolutely requisite that we see ourselves with absolutely no *physical means of resistance* and look to our nonphysical self for help. The sort of object involved must therefore be *frightening* to the sensuous side of us, and that is no longer the case, the moment we feel ourselves equal to it through natural powers.

This is also confirmed by experience. The mightiest natural force is less sublime precisely to the degree to which it appears to be tamed by human beings, and it rapidly becomes sublime again as soon as it confounds human artifice. As a natural force superior to us, a horse that still gallops around wild and unbridled in the forests can be *frightening* and can even provide a subject matter for a sublime portrayal. Once tamed and harnessed to the yoke or before the wagons, the very same horse loses that frightfulness and thereby everything sublime about it. But if this horse, after it has been broken in, tears loose of its reins and, bucking in anger under its rider, violently regains [178] its freedom, it is once again *frightening* and becomes sublime once more.

A human being's physical superiority over natural forces is therefore so little a reason for something being sublime that almost everywhere that superiority is encountered it weakens or completely destroys the sublimity of the object. We can, of course, with considerable pleasure, dwell on the human skill that is capable of subduing the wildest forces of nature. Yet the source of this pleasure is *logical* and not *aesthetic*; it is a result of reflection and is not inspired by the immediate image of something.

Hence, nature is practically sublime only where it is *frightening*. But then the question arises: is this also the case in reverse? Is it also practically sublime wherever it is *frightening*?

Here we must return once again to the concept of the sublime. As essential as it is that we feel ourselves as sensuous beings to be dependent upon the object, it is just as essential, on the other hand, that we feel ourselves as rational beings to be independent of that very object. Where the former is missing, where there is nothing in the object that frightens our sensuous nature, no sublimity is possible. Where the latter is absent, that is to say, where the object is *merely* frightening and we do not feel ourselves as rational beings to be superior to it, then sublimity is just as remote a possibility.

In order to experience something frightening as sublime and take pleasure in it, inner freedom on the part of the mind is an absolute requisite. Indeed, something frightening can be sublime merely by the fact that it allows us to experience our independence, our mind's freedom. Actual and serious fear, however, overcomes all freedom of mind.

Therefore, the sublime object must, of course, be frightening, but it may not incite actual fear. Fear is a condition of *suffering* and *violence*; only in a detached consideration of something and through the feeling of the activity inside ourselves can we take pleasure in something sublime. Thus either the fearful object may not direct its power at us at all or, if this happens, then [179] our spirit must remain free, while our sensuous nature is being overwhelmed. This latter case is, however, extremely rare, and demands an *elevation* of human nature that can scarcely be considered possible in an individual. For where we actually find ourselves in danger, where we ourselves are the object of an inimical natural power, aesthetic judgment is finished. As sublime as a storm at sea may be when viewed from the shore, those who find themselves

on the ship devastated by the storm are just as little disposed to pass this aesthetic judgment on it.

Hence, we are concerned only with the first case where we are able, of course, to witness the might of the frightful object but without it being directed at us, in other words, where we *know* that we are *safe* from that very object. It is only in the imagination, then, that we put ourselves in a position where this power could affect us and all resistance would be in vain. What is terrifying thus exists solely in the representation [*Vorstellung*] of it; yet even the mere representation of danger, if it is vivid enough, sets the preservation instinct in motion and the result is something analogous to what the actual sensation would produce. A shudder grips us, a feeling of anxiety stirs, our sensuous nature is aroused. And without this onset of actual suffering, without this serious attack on our existence, we would merely be playing with the object. And it must be *serious*, at least in the sensation, if reason is supposed to have recourse to the idea of its freedom. Consciousness of the freedom within us can be valid and worthwhile only insofar as it is serious about this; but it cannot be serious if we are merely playing with the representation of the danger.

I have said that we must be safe and secure if we are to enjoy what is *frightening*. Now there are, however, instances of misfortune and danger from which a human being can never know that he is safe and yet the representation of these misfortunes and dangers can still be and even actually is sublime. The concept of safety thus cannot be restricted to the fact that someone knows that he is physically out of danger, as, for example, when someone peers down into an enormous depression from a high and well-secured parapet or [180] looks down at a stormy lake from a height. In such cases the fearlessness is, of course, based upon the certainty that one cannot be affected. But on what would anyone be willing to base his security in the face of fate, the omnipresent power of the divinity, painful diseases, poignant losses, or death? Here there is no physical basis at hand at all for putting oneself at ease. If we reflect on fate in its frightfulness, then we must without hesitation admit to ourselves that we are anything but removed from it.

There is accordingly a twofold basis for security. In the face of such evils as it is in our physical power to elude, we can have external, physical security. However, when confronted by the sort

of evils that we are in no position to resist or evade by any natural means, we can have merely inner or moral security. This distinction is important, especially in relation to the sublime.

Physical security provides an immediate reason for our sensuous nature to be at ease, completely unrelated to our inner or moral condition. Thus, too, nothing at all is required to be able to regard an object without fear if we find ourselves in this physical safety when confronted by the object. For just this reason, one finds a far greater uniformity to people's judgments about the sublimity of *such objects*, the sighting of which is bound up with this physical security, than about those objects in the face of which one has only moral security. The cause is obvious. Physical security is beneficial to everyone in the same way. Moral security, on the other hand, presupposes a state of mind not found in all individuals. Yet, because this physical security holds only for our sensuous nature, it possesses nothing of itself that could please our rational nature and its influence is merely negative, in that it simply keeps the self-preservation instinct from being frightened and the freedom of mind from being overwhelmed.

In the case of inner or *moral security* things are completely different. This security is, of course, also a basis for putting our *sensuous nature* at ease (otherwise it would itself be sublime), but it is so only [181] indirectly, through ideas of reason. We look upon the fearful without fear because we feel ourselves to be beyond the reach of its power over us as natural beings, either through the consciousness of our *innocence* or through the thoughts of the *indestructibility of our being*. This moral security and certitude thus postulate, as we see, *ideas of religion*, since only *religion*, not *morality*, sets out grounds for putting our sensuous nature at ease. Morality inexorably follows the prescription of reason, without any regard for the interest of our sensuous nature. It is religion, however, that seeks to establish a reconciliation, an agreement between the demands of reason and the inclinations of our sensuous nature. Hence, for moral security it does not at all suffice that we possess a moral disposition. Rather, it is also necessary that we think of *nature* in accord with the *moral law* or, what in this case is one and the same, that we think of nature under the sway of a pure rational being. Death, for example, is one such object in the face of which we have *only* moral security. For most

people (since most people by far are more sensuous than they are rational) the vivid representation of all the terrors of death, joined with the certainty of being unable to escape it, would make it quite impossible to combine this image with as much composure as an aesthetic judgment requires—if the rational belief in an immortality, even for our sensuous nature, did not provide a tolerable way out.

Yet this must not be understood as though the image of death, if combined with sublimity, sustains this sublimity through the idea of immortality.—Nothing could be further from the truth!—The idea of immortality, as I am taking it to be here, can put our instinct to survive, that is to say, our sensuous nature, at ease and I must note, once and for all, that as far as making a sublime impression is concerned, our sensuous nature with its demands must be completely set aside and every basis for reassuring us must be sought in reason alone. Thus, the very idea of immortality, in which our sensuous side to a certain extent is still given its due (as it is put forward in all positive religions), [182] can contribute nothing at all to the representation of death as a sublime object. Rather this idea must simply stand, as it were, in the background in order to come to the aid of our sensuous nature alone, in case the latter feels desperate and defenseless, exposed to all the terror of being annihilated, and threatened by the prospect of succumbing to this violent assault. If this idea of immortality, however, becomes the prevailing idea in the mind, death loses its *fearfulness* and the *sublime* disappears.

If the divinity is represented in its omniscience, holiness, and might—an omniscience that illuminates all the crevices and corners of the human heart, a holiness that permits no impure emotion, and a might that has our physical fate in its power—it is a *fearful* image and can thus become a *sublime* one. We can have no physical security against the effects of this might, since it is as impossible to *elude* it as it is to *resist* it. We are thus left with only moral security that we base upon the justice of this being, together with our innocence. Because we are conscious of our innocence and thus secure in the face of the godhead, we look without terror upon the terrifying phenomena by means of which it makes its power known. When this unbounded, irresistible, and all-present power is represented, that moral security makes it possible for us not to

lose our freedom of mind completely, for when that is gone, the mind is in no mood to make an aesthetic judgment. Yet this feeling of security, even though it has a moral basis, cannot be the cause of the sublime, for in the end it only provides a basis for reassuring our sensuous nature. This sense of security satisfies the instinct for self-preservation, but the sublime is never based upon the satisfaction of our instincts. If the image of divinity is to be practically (dynamically) sublime, then we have to tie the feeling of our security *not to our existence* but rather *to our principles*. It has to be irrelevant to us how we fare as natural beings in the process, if we feel that, simply as intellects, we are independent of the effects of its might. But we feel that as rational beings we are not dependent even on divine omnipotence [183] since even that omnipotence cannot destroy our autonomy, cannot determine our will against our principles. Only insofar, therefore, as we deny the divinity all *natural influence on determinations of our will*, is the representation of its power dynamically sublime.

As far as what determines the will is concerned, feeling that one is independent of the divinity means nothing else than being conscious that the divinity could never *as a force* act upon the will. Since, however, the pure will must always coincide with the divine will, there can never be a case where, on the basis of pure reason, we determine ourselves in a way that goes against the divine will. Hence we deny the divinity influence on our will merely insofar as we are conscious that *the divinity could influence the determinations of our wills only through its agreement with the pure law of reason within us*, that is to say, not through authority, not through reward or punishment, not through regard for the divinity's might. Our reason venerates in the divinity nothing but its holiness and also fears nothing but its disapproval—and even this only insofar as our reason recognizes in the divine reason its own law. It is not a matter of divine *caprice* to approve or disapprove of our sentiments; that is determined instead by our behavior. In the sole case, therefore, where the divinity could become fearful for us, namely, in its disapproval, we are not dependent upon it. Hence, represented as a power capable, of course, of destroying our *existence*, but as long as we still have this existence, unable to have any influence on the actions of our reason, the divinity is dynamically

sublime—and only the religion that imparts this image of the divinity to us bears the seal of sublimity within it.* [184]

The object of the practically-sublime must be frightening to the sensuous side of human nature; an evil must threaten our physical condition and the representation of the danger must set our self-preservation instinct in motion.

As far as the emotion involved in the preservation-instinct is concerned, our *intelligible self*, namely, that within us that is not of nature, must distinguish itself from the sensuous side of our being and become aware of its self-sufficiency, of its independence from everything that can affect its physical nature. In short, it must become conscious of its freedom.

This freedom, however, is in an unqualified sense only moral, not physical. Not as sensuous beings and neither through our natural powers nor through our intellect may we feel superior to the fearful object. For then our security would always be a function merely of physical causes; in effect, it would be empirical and as a result there would always remain a dependency upon nature. Instead, it must be completely irrelevant to us how we fare as sensuous beings in the process, and our freedom must consist merely in the fact that we regard, our physical condition, determined as it can be by nature, as something external and alien, having no influence on our moral person, and as something we do not count as part of our self. [185]

*This analysis of the concept of the dynamically sublime, Kant says, seems to be contradicted by the fact that we are used to representing God in a violent storm, an earthquake, and so on, as an angry power and yet as sublime, in which case it would be as foolish as it is frivolous on our part to imagine a superiority of mind over the effects of such a power. Here, not a feeling of the sublimity of our own nature, but rather far more a feeling of dejection and submission seems to be the frame of mind best suited to the appearance of such an object. In religion in general, throwing oneself down and adoring with contrite gestures full of fear seem to be the only appropriate behavior in the presence of the divinity, behavior most peoples have also accordingly taken up. But, he continues, this frame of mind is not at all necessarily bound up with the idea of the *sublimity* of a religion. The human being conscious of his own guilt and thus having cause to fear is not at all in a frame of mind to wonder at the divine greatness. Only when his conscience is clean, do those effects of the divine power serve to give him a sublime idea of the divinity, inasmuch as he is then elevated above the *fear* of the effects of this power through the feeling of his own sublime disposition. He stands in awe [*Ehrfurcht*], not in fear [*Furcht*], of the divinity. On the other hand, superstition feels only fear and anxiety toward divinity, without esteeming it. Out of such feeling there can never arise a religion

Someone who overcomes what is fearful is *magnificent* [*groß*]. Someone who, even while succumbing to the fearful, does not fear it, is *sublime* [*erhaben*].

Hannibal was magnificent from a theoretical point of view, since he forged a passage over the untrodden Alps to Italy. He was magnificent in a practical sense, or sublime, only in misfortune.

Hercules was magnificent because he undertook and completed his twelve tasks.

Prometheus was sublime because, fettered to the Caucasus, he did not regret his deed and did not acknowledge having done anything wrong.

An individual can display magnificence in *good fortune*, sublimity only in *misfortune*.

Hence, any object that shows us our impotence as natural beings is practically-sublime, as long as it also discloses a capacity within us to resist that is of a completely different order. This capacity does *not*, of course, remove the danger to our physical existence, but (what is infinitely more) separates our physical existence from our personhood. Hence, when something sublime is represented or entertained, we become conscious, not of *material* security in a single instance, but rather of an *ideal* security extending over all possible instances. This is accordingly based, not on overturning or overcoming in any sense a danger threatening us, but rather on removing the sole and ultimate condition for something to be a danger to us. The experience of the sublime removes this condition by teaching us to regard the sensuous part of our being, what alone is subject to the danger, as an external, natural thing that has no effect at all on what we genuinely are as persons, our moral selves.

Having established the concept of the practically-sublime, we are in a position to classify it in terms of both the variety of objects that arouse it and the variety of our relationships to these objects.

There are three sorts of things that we distinguish in the representation of the sublime: *first*, the power of some natural object; *second*, the relation of this power to our capacity to resist it physically; *third*, the relation of this power to the [186] moral person

of uprightness, but only ingratiation and the solicitation of favor. Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment. Analytic of the Sublime*.

within us. The sublime is thus the effect of three images following upon one another: (1) an objective, physical power, (2) our subjective, physical impotence, and (3) our subjective, moral superiority. Although essentially all three elements must be combined in every representation of the sublime, it is nevertheless a contingent matter how we arrive at a representation of them, and this fact is the basis for a central, twofold distinction with respect to the sublimity of power.

1. Either some subject matter [*Gegenstand*] simply as a power or, in other words, the objective cause of suffering but not the suffering itself may be presented for viewing, and it is left to the individual making the judgment to produce the image of the suffering in himself and transform that subject matter into an object [*Objekt*] of fear by virtue of its relation to the preservation instinct and into something sublime by virtue of its relation to the moral person within him.

2. Or, in addition to the subject matter as a power, its fearfulness for human beings, the suffering itself, may be objectively represented as well, leaving nothing else for the individual making the judgment to do but apply it to his moral condition and produce something sublime out of something fearful.

An object [*Objekt*] of the first class is contemplatively-sublime, an object of the second class is pathetically-sublime.

I. The Contemplative Sublimity of Power

The kinds of subject matter that show us nothing more than a power of nature far superior to our own, but otherwise leave it up to us to relate that power to our physical state or to our moral character as persons, are sublime solely in a contemplative sense. I characterize them [187] in this way because they do not take hold of the mind with such ferocity that it is unable to continue calmly contemplating them. In the case of what is contemplatively sublime it is mostly a matter of the mind's own activity, because only one of the conditions of sublimity is provided externally, while the other two must be realized by the individual himself. For this reason the effect of the contemplatively sublime is neither as intense

nor as widespread as the effect of the practically sublime. The effect is *not as widespread* because not everyone has sufficient imagination to produce in themselves a vivid image of the danger, nor do they all have enough moral self-sufficiency and fortitude not to try to avoid such an image. The effect is *not as powerful*, because the image of the danger in this case, even if it is quite vividly awakened, is nonetheless always *voluntary*, and it is much easier for the mind to remain in control of an image that it produced of itself. Hence, the contemplatively-sublime produces a slighter, but also less mixed sort of enjoyment.

For the contemplatively-sublime, nature provides nothing but some power-laden subject matter. It is left to the imagination to make something out of this that is frightening to humanity. How the sublime precisely turns out depends upon whether the part played by the imagination in producing what is fearful is respectively great or small, and whether the imagination does its job openly or furtively.

An abyss appearing at our feet, a thunderstorm, a flaming volcano, a mass of rock looming over us as though it were about to plunge down on us, a storm at sea, a bitter winter in the polar regions, a summer in the tropics, ferocious or poisonous animals, a flood—all these and more are the sorts of natural forces in the face of which our capacity to resist counts for nothing, natural forces that contradict our physical existence. Even certain ideal objects such as, for example, *time* considered as a power working quietly but inexorably, *necessity* with its rigorous laws from which no natural being can escape, and even the moral idea of *duty* that behaves often enough like an inimical power toward our physical existence, [188] become fearful objects as soon as the *imagination* relates them to the preservation instinct, and they become sublime as soon as *reason* applies them to its supreme laws. In all these cases, however, since the fantasy first adds the fearful character and it is completely up to us to suppress an idea that we have produced ourselves, these objects belong to the class of the contemplatively-sublime.

Yet the image of danger still has a *real* basis here, and what is required is merely the simple operation of connecting the existence of these things with our physical existence in a *single* image. If this is done, something frightful is then present. Fantasy need contrib-

ute nothing on its own; instead it simply clings to what is presented to it.

Quite often subject matters taken from nature and in themselves neutral, are subjectively transformed by the intervention of fantasy into frightful powers, and fantasy itself does not merely *discover* what is frightful through comparison, *but rather creates* it quite arbitrarily without an adequate, objective basis for it. This is the case for the *extraordinary* and the *indeterminate*.

For humanity in its infancy, where the imagination works in the most unencumbered way, everything unusual is terrifying. In each unexpected appearance of nature people believe they see an enemy, an enemy armed against their existence. At the same time the preservation instinct is at work meeting this attack. In this period the preservation instinct is their unbridled master and, since this instinct is anxious and cowardly, its domination is a realm of terror and fear. The superstition formed in this epoch is correspondingly dark and fearful, and even the morals bear this hostile, gloomy character. One finds people who arm themselves before they dress, and they grab first for the sword when meeting a stranger. The custom of the ancient Taureans, to sacrifice to Diana every newcomer who had the misfortune to land on their coast, scarcely had any other origin than *fear*. For only a human being *formed in a depraved way* and not someone merely *unformed* is so barbaric that he rages against what can do him no harm. [189]

This fear of everything extraordinary disappears, to be sure, with the rise of culture, but not so completely that no trace of it remains in the *aesthetic* contemplation of nature, where people deliberately give themselves up to the play of fantasy. Writers know this quite well and accordingly do not fail to make use of *extraordinary* things, at least as an ingredient in what is frightful. A profound quiet, an immense emptiness, a sudden light in the dark are in themselves quite neutral things, distinguished by nothing but their extraordinariness and unusualness. Nevertheless, they arouse a feeling of fright or, at least, intensify its impression, and for that reason are suited to be something sublime.

If Virgil wants to scare us about the realm of Hades, he draws our attention above all to its emptiness and stillness. He calls it *loca nocte late tacentia*, "that silent, expansive plain of night,"

domos vacuas Ditis et inania regna, "the empty dwellings and hollow realms of Pluto."

During the initiations into the mysteries of the ancients a fearful, solemn impression was especially preferred, and to this end people also made use of silence in particular. A profound quiet provides the imagination with a free space to play and intensifies the expectation of something frightful that is supposed to come. In devotional exercises the silence observed by an entire community gathered together is a very effective means of prodding their fantasies and putting their minds in a solemn mood. Even folk superstition makes use of silence in its delusions, for, as is well known, a profound quiet must be observed if someone has to dig for a treasure. In the enchanted palaces of fairy tales a deathly silence reigns, awakening horrors, and it is part of the natural history of enchanted forests that nothing living moves within them. Even *loneliness* is frightful as soon as it is neither voluntary nor passing, such as, for example, the banishment to an uninhabited island. A far-flung desert, a solitary forest several miles long, losing one's way around a seemingly boundless lake—these are the sort of simple images that can stir up fears and should be used in poetry to depict the sublime. However, here (in the case of [190] loneliness) there is already an objective basis of the fear, since the idea of a great loneliness also brings with it the idea of *helplessness*.

Fantasy proves itself to be far more skilled at making something terrifying out of something *mysterious*, indeterminate, and *impenetrable*. Here it is in its genuine element with a wide range of possibilities open to it, given the fact that the actual world sets no boundaries to it and its operations are not limited to any particular case. Yet, that it is inclined precisely to what is *terrible* and that the unknown is a source of *fear* more than hope, lies in the nature of the preservation instinct that guides it. Revulsion works with incomparably greater speed and force than desire does, and for this reason we rather suppose something bad than expect something good lying behind what is unknown.

Darkness can be terrifying and precisely for that reason is suited to the sublime. Yet it is not terrifying in itself, but rather because it conceals objects from us and thus delivers us up to the full force of the imagination. As soon as the danger becomes clear, a considerable part of the fear disappears. The sense of sight, the primary

sentry of our existence, fails us in the darkness and we feel ourselves defenselessly exposed to the hidden danger. For this reason superstition puts all appearances of spirits at the midnight hour, and the realm of death is represented as a realm of endless night. In the writings of Homer, where humanity still speaks its most natural language, darkness is portrayed as one of the greatest evils.

There lie the land and the city of the people of Chimer.
Constantly they grope in the night and fog, and ne'er
Does the God of the shining sun show them a beam of
light;

Instead, these wretched people lie enveloped by
terrifying night.

Odyssey (eleventh song)

"Jupiter," the brave Ajax calls out in the darkness of the
battle, "free the Greeks from this darkness. Let it become day,
let these eyes see, and then, if it is your will, let me fall in light."
Iliad [191]

Even the *indeterminate* is an ingredient of the terrible, and for no other reason than because it gives the imagination freedom to paint the picture as it sees fit. What is determinate, on the other hand, leads to distinct knowledge and withdraws the object from the arbitrary play of fantasy, because it subjects the object to the intellect.

Homer's portrayal of the underworld is all the more frightful, precisely because it, as it were, swims in a fog and the shapes of the spirits in Ossian are nothing but ethereal cloud formations, leaving it to fantasy to provide the contours at will.

Everything that is *hidden*, everything *full of mystery*, contributes to what is terrifying and is therefore capable of sublimity. Of this sort is the inscription on the temple of Isis at Sais, in Egypt. "I am all that is, that has been, and that will be. No mortal man has lifted my veil." It is precisely this uncertainty and mysteriousness that lend the terrifying character to people's images of the future after death. These feelings are expressed quite successfully in Hamlet's well-known soliloquy.

The description that Tacitus gives us of the solemn procession

of the goddess Hertha becomes sublime in a terrifying way because of the darkness he spreads over it. The goddess's coach disappears into the deepest recesses of the forest and no one employed for this mysterious service comes back alive. With a shudder one wonders what it might be that costs the life of someone who sees it, *quod tantum morituri vident*.

All religions have their mysteries that support a holy fright and, just as the majesty of divinity dwells in the all-holy behind the curtain, so the majesty of kings surrounds itself with mystery in order, by means of this artificial invisibility, to keep the respect of their subjects in a state of constant trepidation.

These are the most distinguished subspecies of the power that is contemplatively-sublime, and since it is grounded in the moral vocation common to every human being, one is justified in presupposing a receptiveness to it on the part of all [192] human subjects. The lack of this receptiveness cannot be excused by some contingency of nature, as in the case of merely sensuous feelings; rather it may be considered an imperfection in the subject. At times one finds cognitive sublimity combined with the sublimity of power and the effect is all the greater, if not only the sensuous capacity to resist, but even the capacity to portray finds its match in an object and the sensuous side of human nature with its twofold demand [of knowing and living] is scorned.

II. The Pathetically Sublime

If something is presented to us in an objective way, not merely as a power in general, but at the same time as a power having catastrophic consequences for people—in other words, if it does not merely *show*, but also actually *expresses* its power in a hostile manner—then the imagination is no longer free to refer it to the preservation-instinct or not; instead, the imagination now *must* do so, it is objectively required to do so. Yet actual suffering does not permit an aesthetic judgment, since such suffering overcomes the mind's freedom. Thus, the fearful object may not demonstrate its destructive power on the individual judging, that is, we may not *ourselves* suffer, or rather we may suffer only *sympathetically*. However, even if the suffering we sympathize with exists *outside* us, it is too violent for our sensuous nature. The empathizing pain

overwhelms all aesthetic enjoyment. Suffering can become aesthetic and arouse a feeling of sublimity only when either it is a mere illusion and fabrication or (in case it had happened in reality) it is presented, not immediately to the senses, but to the imagination. The image of another's suffering, combined with emotion and the consciousness of the moral freedom within us, is *pathetically sublime*.

The sympathy or the empathizing (shared) emotion is no free expression of our mind, that we [193] would first have to produce spontaneously in ourselves. Rather it is an involuntary affection [*Affektion*] on the part of our capacity to have feelings, determined by natural law. It does not at all depend upon our will whether we want to share in the suffering of some creature. The moment we have an image of it, we *must* feel it. *Nature*, not our *freedom* acts, and the movement of the mind hurries ahead of the decision.

Therefore, as soon as we hold on to the image of some suffering objectively, then, by virtue of the unchanging natural law of sympathy, a feeling for this suffering must follow within ourselves. By this means we make it our own, as it were. *We suffer with*. *Empathy* or *compassion* means not merely the shared grief, the fact of being moved by another's misfortune, but rather every sorrowful emotion, without distinction, which we feel when we enter into someone else's feelings. Hence, there are as many sorts of empathy as there are diverse sorts of suffering originally: empathizing fear, empathizing fright, empathizing anxiety, empathizing anger, empathizing despair.

Yet, if what arouses the emotion (or what is pathetic) is supposed to provide a basis for the sublime, it may not be pressed to the point where one is actually *suffering oneself*. Even in the midst of the most violent emotion we must *distinguish* ourselves from the individual who himself suffers, for the freedom of spirit is gone as soon as the illusion is transformed into the complete truth.

If empathizing is elevated to such a pitch that we seriously confuse ourselves with the person suffering, then we no longer control the emotion, but rather it controls us. On the other hand, if the sympathy remains within its aesthetic boundaries, then it combines two chief conditions of the sublime: a sensuously vital image of the suffering together with the feeling of one's own security.

But this feeling of security when faced with the image of someone

else's suffering is in no sense the *basis* of what is sublime, and is not at all the *source* of the pleasure we draw from this image. The pathetic becomes sublime only through the consciousness of our moral, not our physical freedom. Not because we see ourselves [194] removed from this suffering by our good fortune (for then we would still always have a very poor guarantee of our security), but rather because we feel our moral self to be removed from the causality of this suffering, namely, from its influence upon what determines our willing, it *elevates* [*erhebt*] our mind and becomes *pathetically sublime*.

It is not absolutely necessary that one actually feel the strength of soul within oneself to assert one's moral freedom in the face of a seriously immanent danger. We are talking here, not about what *happens*, but rather about what *should* and *can* happen; in other words, we are talking about our *calling*, not about what we actually *do*; about our power, not about its use. Because we see a heavily loaded freighter go down in the storm, we are able to feel ourselves quite unhappily in the position of the merchant, whose entire estate is swallowed up by the water. Yet at the same time, we still feel as well that this loss only concerns contingent things and that we have a duty to rise above it. However, nothing can be a duty if it cannot be realized, and what *should* happen must *be able* to happen. That, however, we *can* regard a loss with indifference, a loss that is rightly so poignant for us as sensuous beings, proves that there is a capacity within us to act according to laws completely different from those of the sensuous faculties, a capacity having nothing in common with natural instinct. Everything that makes us conscious of this capacity within us is *sublime*.

One can quite rightly say, therefore, that one will endure the loss of goods with nothing less than composure. This does not hinder the feelings of the sublime at all—if one only feels that one *should* disregard the loss and that a duty exists to allow it no influence on the self-determining of reason. Of course, all the aesthetic power of the magnificent and the sublime is lost on someone who does not even have a sense *for that duty*.

Hence, at least a capacity of the mind to become conscious of its rational determination and a receptivity to the idea of duty are indispensable, even if at the same time one also recognizes the limits that the weakness of humanity [195] may have set to their

exercise. In general, it would be dangerous for the enjoyment of the good as well as of the sublime, if one could only have a sense for what one has oneself achieved or what one trusts oneself to achieve. But it is a basic feature of humanity, and one worthy of respect, that humanity acknowledges a good thing, at least in *aesthetic* judgments, even if it would have to speak *against* itself, and that it pays homage to the pure ideas of reason, at least in feeling, even if it does not always have sufficient strength actually to *act* on those ideas.

Consequently, two main conditions must be met for the *pathetically sublime*: *first*, a vivid image of *suffering*, in order to awaken the emotion of compassion with the proper strength, and *second*, an image of the *resistance* to the suffering, in order to call into consciousness the mind's inner freedom. Only by virtue of the first condition does the object become *pathetic*, only by virtue of the second condition does the pathetic become at the same time something *sublime*.

From this basic principle flow the two fundamental laws of all tragic art. These are *first*: portrayal of the suffering nature; *second*, portrayal of moral independence in the suffering.

Translated by Daniel O. Dahlstrom

On the Pathetic*

Portrayal of suffering—as mere suffering—is never the end of art, but as a means to this end it is of the utmost importance to art. The ultimate purpose of art is to depict what transcends the realm of the senses and the art of tragedy in particular accomplishes this by displaying morality's independence, its freedom, in the throes of passion, from nature's laws. The principle of freedom within us makes itself known only by the resistance it exerts against the power of feelings, while the resistance can be measured only by the strength of the onslaught of feelings. Thus, in order for human *intelligence* to reveal itself as a force independent of nature, it is necessary for nature first to demonstrate all its might before our eyes. The *sensuous being* must *suffer* deeply and vehemently, the pathos must be present, so that the rational being can testify to its independence and, *by acting*, can present itself.

We can never know whether a *state of mind* is a result of its moral strength, if we have not been convinced that it is not the result of insensitivity. To master feelings that only gently stroke the surface of the soul in passing is no art. It is another thing, however, for the mind to maintain its freedom in a storm that stirs up an individual's entire sensuous nature; then a capacity to resist is required that is infinitely superior to all the power of nature. Thus,

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