

Working Papers in
Philosophy

Szerkesztő: Kovács Gábor

2015/3

The Poetic Possibility of the Sublime

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Abstract

The Poetic Possibility of the Sublime

In Kant's view, poetry is the most complete art because it most fully exploits all three dimensions of communication. The difference between music with text and that without might be that the former first raises ideas and through that triggers emotions while the latter first triggers emotions and only through that raises ideas; but both do raise ideas as well as emotions. So Kant does assume that all media of art can raise ideas as well as suggest experiences (intuitions) and communicate emotions; therefore all arts at least in principle can raise ideas of nature and trigger emotions associable with our ideas of nature. Thus there is no reason in principle why any art could not trigger the experience of the sublime, even though Kant, like his contemporaries, obviously assumes that poetry is the art most likely to do so.

Paul Guyer: *The Poetic Possibility of the Sublime*

1 . *Is Sublime Art Actual?*

From the beginning of his career, Kant, like everyone else in his century, seemed to assume that art as well as nature can be sublime, or more precisely, avoiding the “subreption” that he subsequently diagnosed, can trigger the experience of sublimity.¹ Thus, in first introducing both terms of the contrast between the beautiful and the sublime in his 1764 *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant immediately appeals to experiences of both nature and art:

The finer feeling that we will now consider is preeminently of two kinds: the feeling of the **sublime** and of the **beautiful**. Being touched [*Die Rührung*] by either is agreeable, but in very different ways. The sight of a mountain whose snow-covered peaks arise above the clouds, the description of a raging storm, or the depiction of the kingdom of hell by **Milton** arouses satisfaction, but with dread; by contrast, the prospect of meadows strewn with flowers, of valleys with winding brooks, covered with grazing herds, the description of Elysium, or **Homer’s** depiction of the girdle of Venus also occasion an agreeable sentiment [*Empfindung*], but one that is joyful and smiling. For the former to make its impression on us in its proper strength, we must have a **feeling** of the **sublime**,

¹ This paper was presented in the seminar series of the Institute of Philosophy, Hungarian Academy of Sciences on 24th of March, 2015 (Editor).

¹ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment (CPJ)*, edited by Paul Guyer, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §23, 5:245. Other works by Kant to be cited here will include the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime (OBS)*, translated by Paul Guyer, and *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View (APV)*, translated by Robert B. Louden, both in Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, edited by Günter Zöllner and Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). In all cases quotations are located by volume and page number from the *Akademie* edition, *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Royal Prussian (subsequently German, then Berlin-Brandenburg) Academy of Sciences (Berlin: Georg Reimer, subsequently Walter de Gruyter, 1900--), rather than the page numbers in the translation.

and in order properly to **enjoy** the latter we must have a **feeling** for the **beautiful**.

(*OBS*, First Section, 5:208)

Indeed, Kant may be referring to not two but three different categories of trigger for the experience of the sublime (and of the beautiful) here: one's own, direct experience of nature, as in the case of a "sight" of towering snow-covered mountains or the "prospect" of a pastoral landscape; the artistic depiction, here through the words of poetry, such as that of Homer or Milton, of something, actually something imaginary, the girdle of Venus, or at least not accessible to the senses, such as the kingdom of hell; but also an ordinary rather than poetic description of something in nature, a raging storm, or in an imagined nature, such as Elysium. But the issue I am going to address is whether there is the same prospect for the experience of sublimity from art as there is from nature, so let's not worry now about the case of non-artistic description, although at a later point in my discussion the question of what makes the difference between artistic depiction (even in words) and non-artistic description will in fact arise. For now, the point that I want to make is that a quarter-century later, in his next and only mature publication of aesthetics, Kant uses the very same example of a poetic trigger of the experience of the sublime, and so it seems natural to assume that later as well as earlier he assumes that this experience can be triggered by art as well as by nature. Thus, in his discussion of "aesthetic ideas" in his account of fine art in the *Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment*, he says that "The poet ventures to make sensible rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation, etc., as well as to make that of which there are examples in experience, e.g., death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame, etc., sensible beyond the limits of experience, with a completeness that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature, by means of an imagination that emulates the precedent of reason" (*CPJ*, §49, 5:314). Whether or not Kant means to refer specifically to Milton again, he invokes among others the same example of poetic depiction that can trigger the experience of the sublime that he previously used, so it seems only natural to assume that he still thinks that such an aesthetic idea, a poetic depiction of the kingdom of hell, can trigger the experience of the sublime.

In the *Observations*, Kant also assumed that non-verbal and indeed non-representational art could trigger the experience of the sublime. He uses two examples widely used throughout the period:

The sublime must always be large, the beautiful can also be small. The sublime must be simple, the beautiful can be decorated and ornamented. A great height is just as sublime as a great depth, ut the latter is accompanied with the sensation of shuddering, the former with that of admiration; hence the latter sentiment can be terrifyingly sublime and the former noble. The sight of an Egyptian pyramid is far more moving, as **Hasselquist** reports, than one can imagine from any description, but its construction is simple and noble. St. Peter's in Rome is magnificent. Since on its frame, which is grand and simple, beauty, e.g., gold, mosaics, etc., are spread in such a way that it is still the sentiments of the sublime which has the most effect, the object is called magnificent (*OBS*, First Section, 5:210) --

but the magnificent is still one of the species of the sublime, which here Kant divides into the terrifying, the noble, and the magnificent, this tripartite distinction differing from his later division of the sublime into the mathematical and the dynamical. (Ironically, Kant has to make his point about a kind of experience that is beyond description on the basis of description, since as we all know, he never traveled to Egypt or Rome or anywhere else.)

In the case of architecture, Kant's later position seems less clear. He does mention the pyramids and St. Peter's again in the third *Critique*, but perhaps only to illustrate a point that he wants to make about the conditions for the experience of sublimity from nature, not necessarily to assert that our experience of these artificial structures is actually an experience of sublimity. That is, attempting to illustrate the point that it is a delicate, perhaps impossible task for the imagination to retain its experience of the parts of something very large while also getting, at least on its own, a sense of the whole, he writes:

This makes it possible to explain a point that Savary [now not Hasselquist] notes in his report on Egypt: that in order to get the full emotional effect [*Rührung*] of the magnitude of the pyramids one must neither come too close to them nor be too far away. For in the latter case, the parts that are apprehended (the stones piled on top of one another) are represented only obscurely, and their representation has no effect on the aesthetic judgment of the subject. In the former case, however, the eye requires some time to complete its apprehension

from the base level to the apex, but during this time the former always partly fades before the imagination has taken in the latter, and the comprehension is never complete. The very same thing can also suffice to explain the bewilderment or sort of embarrassment that is said to seize the spectator on first entering St. Peter's in Rome. For here there is a feeling of the inadequacy of his imagination for presenting the idea of the whole, in which the imagination reaches its maximum and, in the effort to extend it, sinks back into itself, but is thereby transported into an emotionally moving [*rührendes*] satisfaction. (CPJ, §26, 5:252)

This time Kant does not explicitly say that experience of the pyramids or of St. Peter's is an experience of the sublime, whether simple or complex, that is, terrifying or noble, either of which are relatively simple, or magnificent, which is more complex. But neither does he say that these are not themselves experiences of the sublime. Other things being equal, then, it would seem only natural to assume that in using these examples, he still thinks the same thing as earlier, and thus that these examples do not just illustrate a certain condition for the experience of the sublime in nature, although they do that, but that they are also themselves examples of non-descriptive and non-representational triggers of genuine experiences of sublimity.

But are other things equal? Well, why should one even raise this question? After all, everyone in Kant's time thought that both representational, descriptive art such as poetry as well as non-representational, non-descriptive art could trigger the experience of sublimity. Indeed, the concept of the sublime was started on its path to prominence by the circulation and translation into modern languages of the second-century treatise *Peri Hypsous* by "Longinus," and there sublimity is treated specifically as a kind of literary style, not a feature of or experience triggered by nature at all. This work begins with the claim that "Sublimity is a kind of eminence or excellence of discourse. It is the source of the distinction of the very greatest poets and prose writers and the means by which they have given eternal life to their own fame (...) Sublimity, (...) produced at the right moment, tears everything up like a whirlwind, and exhibits the orator's power at a single blow."² Longinus compares the effect of literary sublimity to the

² Longinus, *On Sublimity*, 3-4; cited from Oleg V. Bychkov and Anne Sheppard, editors and translators, *Greek and Roman Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 148.

effect of something natural, a whirlwind, but does not say that it is the natural that is literally or paradigmatically sublime, only the literary – in the first instance, oratory, but as he continues, poetry. Or more precisely, as he continues, he shows how poetry can achieve sublimity through description that begins with what can actually be found in nature but then extends that through the power of imagination:

But how does Homer magnify the divine power?
As far as a man can peer through the mist,
sitting on watch, looking over the wine-dark sea,
so long is the strife of the god's thundering horses.

He uses a cosmic distance to measure their speed. This enormously impressive image would make anyone say, and with reason, that, if the horses of the gods took two strides like that, they would find that there is not enough room in the world.³

Mist and the wine-dark sea can be found in nature but are referred to by poetry – the word “mist” by itself may not yet be poetic, but the expression “wine-dark sea” certainly is – horses are likewise found in nature, but the god's thundering horses are not found in nature, but only imagined in poetry, and they seem above all to be what renders the passage sublime; so poetry seems to be the natural home of the sublime.

Under the spell of Longinus, eighteenth-century writers too numerous to mention assumed without argument that poetry is if not exclusively sublime then certainly as sublime as nature. To use two examples close to Kant, I will appeal just to Baumgarten and Burke. Burke's 1757 *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* is an obvious source for Kant's discussion of the sublime, since it was translated into German and 1773 and Kant explicitly refers to it in the third *Critique*, although only as interesting “empirical exposition” rather than *a priori* analysis or deduction of the sublime; and even though the German translation was not yet available to Kant at the time of his early *Observations*, Burke's book had been immediately reviewed by Moses Mendelssohn, so Kant could already have had a

³Longinus, *On Sublimity*, 5, citing Homer, *Illiad*, 5.770-2; *Greek and Roman Aesthetics*, pp. 151-2

sense of its contents.⁴ Burke does not introduce the sublime (or the beautiful) as a quality of or response to art; on the contrary, he begins his discussion as an account of “The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*” (*Enquiry*, Part Two, section I; Burke’s emphasis). But he immediately and seamlessly glides to illustrations of his claims about the sublime drawn from art; indeed, his very first illustration, of the claim that “obscurity” is one of the sources of art, is drawn from Milton, the “description of Death in the second book” of *Paradise Lost* beginning “The other shape, /If shape it might be called that had none /Distinguishable, in member, joint, or limb” (Part Two, section III); this passage could well be a source for Kant’s inclusion of death along with kingdom of hell among the typical contents of aesthetic ideas. Burke clearly takes it for granted that the experience of the sublime can be triggered by art as well as by nature, and indeed almost all his illustrations of the various triggers of the sublime are drawn from poetry (including more Milton, Shakespeare, Spenser, Virgil, and Lucretius), although he does explicitly refer to the sublime and the magnificent in “building,” but without mentioning any examples. Burke does feel it incumbent upon himself to explain *how* art, especially poetry, can trigger the experience of the sublime as well as nature can, and he devotes the final part of his *Enquiry* to the argument that while “Natural objects affect us, by the laws of that connexion, which Providence has established between certain motions and configurations of bodies, and certain consequent feelings in our minds,” painting “in the same manner, but with the superadded pleasure of imitation,” and architecture again by the “laws of nature” but also through the “law of reason[,] from which [together] result the rules of proportion” (Part Five, section I), words affect us not through “any representation raised in the mind of the things for which they stand” but more directly, as sounds, which “produce in the mind, whenever they are afterwards mentioned, effects similar to those of” the particular original “occasions, wherein we receive some good, or suffer some evil, or see others affected with good or evil,” and have first heard them used (Part Five, section II). In other words, on Burke’s account, words and thus poetry or literature more generally affect us by association, by immediately arousing emotions associated with the objects to which they refer without benefit of any intervening idea or image of those

⁴ See Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, edited by Paul Guyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), and Moses Mendelssohn, “Philosophische Untersuchung des Ursprungs unserer Ideen vom Erhabenen und Schönen,” *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften* 3:2 (1758), reprinted in Mendelssohn, *Ästhetische Schriften in Auswahl*, edited by Otto F. Best (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), pp. 247-65. At Mendelssohn’s instigation, his friend Gotthold Ephraim Lessing had begun a translation of Burke’s work, but the version published in 1773 was by Christian Garve.

objects. We will see subsequently that Kant allows for emotional impact by association in the case of some arts, notably music, but is not committed to association as the explanation for the impact of poetry, let alone as the exclusive explanation thereof.

Baumgarten is a less obvious source for Kant's treatment of the sublime than Burke, and Kant does not mention him explicitly in the *Analytic of the Sublime*. However, Baumgarten's category of "aesthetic magnitude" is clearly his version of the sublime, as is evidenced by the fact that the very first authority to whom he refers in this section of the *Aesthetica* is none other than Longinus. Baumgarten's opening definition of aesthetic magnitude refers to neither nature or art; he says the term comprehends "1) the weight of the objects and their gravity, 2) the weight and gravity of the thoughts (*cognitiones*) appropriate to them, 3) together with the fecundity of both."⁵ His compound definition makes it clear that the sublime does not lie in objects considered on their own, but in our relation, that is, our response to them, while his term "thoughts" could be taken to refer either to any subject's response to weighty and grave objects or to the artist's response to them, conveyed and communicated in his work – that ambiguity would be characteristic of Baumgarten's entire work, an analysis of the *felix aestheticus* that is ambiguous between artist and audience. Baumgarten then divides aesthetic magnitude into two categories, "the *natural*, which is not more closely connected with freedom, [and] the *moral*, which is to be attributed to objects and thoughts insofar as they are more closely connected with freedom" (§181). Baumgarten also calls moral aesthetic magnitude "aesthetic dignity," and connects it to the manifestation of virtue (§182). Baumgarten's distinction may be taken as a forerunner of Kant's distinction between the mathematical and the dynamical sublime, although with a qualification to be mentioned later; for now I want to emphasize only the point that Baumgarten immediately illustrates his conception of aesthetic magnitude with examples from poetry, beginning with an illustration of the sublime natural power rather than moral dignity of a human being drawn from Virgil, "Entellus threw his folded cloak from his shoulders and bared the power of his limbs, bones, and muscles. And like a giant he stood there in the sand (...)"⁶ In fact, all of Baumgarten's are from poetry; no pyramids or St. Peter's for him. It might be argued that he is using poetic examples that convey the sublimity *of nature*, including human

⁵ Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Ästhetik*, edited and translated (into German) by Dagmar Mirbach, 2 vols. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2007), §177. Translations from Baumgarten are my own

⁶ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 5, 421-3.

nature, *rather* than of art itself; but it seems more reasonable to read him as assuming that works of art can trigger the experience of the sublime through both what they signify and the signs themselves, through both their content and their aesthetic qualities such as form, diction, and so on.

Thus both Kant and the sort of authors with whom he was most familiar and presumably most influenced by in his treatment of the sublime assumed that works of art, especially but not exclusively poetry, as well as objects in nature could trigger the experience of the sublime. Why would anyone think otherwise?

2 . *Is Sublime Art Possible?*

Against this background, why might it be supposed that Kant denies the possibility of sublime art, or more properly art that triggers the experience of the sublime?

Before raising and then answering this question, we should have a reminder of Kant's account of the sublime before us. Kant's theory is that the complex experience of sublimity, both painful and pleasurable (like the moral feeling of respect), is triggered when the imagination is overwhelmed but in a way that ultimately gives us a sense of the power of our own reason. In all cases of the sublime, as Kant puts it with maximal emphasis, "**That is sublime which even to be able to think of demonstrates a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses**" and their instrument, the imagination (*CPJ*, §25, 5:250). There are two kinds of sublime, the mathematical and the dynamical. In the case of the mathematical sublime, the imagination painfully fails at the task of apprehending something vast, thus apparently endless, or apparently formless in a single image – *apprehensio* rather than *comprehensio aethetica* (*CPJ*, §26, 5:251) – but the experience is pleasurable because we also sense that it is our own power of theoretical reason that has set the task of aesthetic comprehension of the apparently endless or formless in the first place. "What is important is that even being able to think of it as a **whole** indicates a faculty of mind which surpasses every sense" (5:254). In the dynamical sublime, our imaginative response to sensory images of great power, such as "threatening cliffs," "volcanoes with their all-destroying violence," and the rest of Kant's stock examples, is fear for our physical safety and survival, but at the same time such experiences

call forth our power (which is not part of nature) to regard those things about us with which we are concerned (goods, health, and life) as trivial, and hence to regard [nature's] power (to which we are, to be sure, subjected in regard to those things) as not the sort of dominion over ourselves and our authority to which we would have to bow if it came down to our highest principles...Thus nature is called sublime merely because it raises the imagination to the point of presenting those cases in which the mind can make palpable to itself the sublimity of its own vocation even over nature. (*CPJ*, §28, 5:262)

In this case, our initially painful imagination of the dangers of nature is overcome by a pleasurable sense of the power of our own practical reason.

Several points about this account will be relevant to what follows. First, although for Kant nature itself is necessarily represented as indefinitely extended in both space and time, no particular object in it, not even the entire range of the Alps, is actually infinitely extended, completely formless, or for that matter infinitely powerful; that is how some may objects *appear* to us, or strike our *imagination*. Second, as an aesthetic experience, sublimity cannot be deduced from any concepts in accordance with a rule or manifest itself in the subsumption of its object under any determinate concept; that is why Kant has so vaguely described the sublime as “indicating” and “calling forth” and “making palpable” the power of our theoretical or practical reason, and why I have said that the sublime gives us a *sense* of our rational power. Kant does not spell out the difference between a conceptual and an imaginative, aesthetic awareness in more detail, and perhaps given the very character of the aesthetic as indeterminate he could not, but it is crucial that the experience remain aesthetic and that the articulation of Kant's explanation of the experience not be mistaken for conceptual determinacy within the phenomenology of the experience. And finally, Kant's account of the sublime is distinctive for what we might call its self-referentiality: while other contemporary accounts of what Kant would call the mathematical sublime stress our awe at the size and power of nature and perhaps through that awe at the power of its creator, and other accounts of what Kant calls the dynamical sublime, such as Baumgarten's account of the moral sublime interpret it as awe at the character or virtue of some real or fictional actor, for Kant these experiences make each of us aware of *his or her own* powers, her power of theoretical reason and the power of her pure practical reason and will to affirm and maintain her commitment to her moral principles in spite of any threats of mere

nature.⁷ It will be particularly important to ask whether any experience of sublimity in response to art could satisfy this feature as well as experiences of sublimity in response to nature do.

We can now return to the question of why the apparently natural assumption of his contemporaries and even of Kant himself that the experience of the sublime can be triggered by works of art as well as by nature might be questioned. Three problems have been foregrounded in a recent debate on this subject.⁸ First, only an experience of and judgment on the sublime is *pure* in the sense of purity that Kant defines for experiences and judgments of beauty, that is, not dependent upon a concept of the intended purpose of an object, a concept of what it ought to be (see *CPJ*, §16, 5:229).⁹ As Kant puts it, “if the aesthetic judgment is to be **pure (not mixed up with anything teleological** as are the judgments of reason) and if an example of that is to be given which is fully appropriate for the critique of the **aesthetic** power of judgment, then the sublime must not be shown in products of art (e.g., buildings, columns, etc.), where a human end determines the form as well as the magnitude, nor in natural things **the concept of which already brings with it a determinate end** (e.g., animals of a known natural determination), but rather in raw nature” (*CPJ*, §26, 5:252-3). The production of art is always intentional and purposive, indeed an artist typically has multiple intentions, such as to design a building, to design a building of a specific building-type, such as a residence or a temple, to earn a fee, to win fame, and so on, pure aesthetic experiences, judgments, and their objects are supposed to be free from such purposes, which are a constraint on the freedom of the imagination and allow at best for what in the case of beauty Kant calls “adherent” rather than free beauty. Second, although it is in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* rather than in the third *Critique* that Kant says that “the artistic presentation of the sublime in descriptions and embellishments (...) can and should be beautiful, since otherwise it is wild, coarse, and repulsive, and, consequently, repulsive to taste” (*APV*, §68, 7:243), striving for sublimity in art thus “mixes up” the sublime and the

⁷ For further discussion of this self-referentiality as the difference between Kant’s account of the sublime and that of his contemporaries, see my “The Difficulty of the Sublime,” in C. Madelein, J. Pieters, and B. Vandenabeele, eds., *Histories of the Sublime* (Brussels: Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten: 2005). pp. 33-43 (although I did not use that term there).

⁸ See Uygur Abacı, “Kant’s Justified Dismissal of Artistic Sublimity,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66 (2008): 237-51; Robert Clewis, “A Case for Kantian Artistic Sublimity: A Response to Abacı,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68 (2010): 167-70; and Uygur Abacı, “Artistic Sublime Revisited: Reply to Robert Clewis,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68 (2010): 170-3.

⁹ See Abacı, “Kant’s Justified Dismissal,” pp. 240, 241, and “Artistic Sublime Revisited,” pp. 172-3.

beautiful, and leads to an “impure” response and judgment in a second sense.¹⁰ Third, the experience of the sublime is intrinsically connected to nature, or makes an essential reference to it, particularly in the case of the dynamical sublime, in which what is ultimately made palpable to us, in a suitably aesthetic way, is the freedom of our will to determine itself by the moral law alone independently of domination by mere nature (including human nature) and its inevitable determinism. As Uygur Abacı puts it, “nature should be understood as the context to which this object” – the sublime – “belongs (...) the sublime, with both of its negative and positive phases, reflects the contrast between our rationality and sensible nature.”¹¹ And finally, although this point has not been so prominent in the recent debate, it might seem that works of art simply cannot be *big* enough or *mighty* enough to trigger an experience of the sublime. Made by human hands, even if by many of them, even the biggest works of architecture, even not just a single pyramid but the whole complex of them, is neither endless nor formless, but at best “colossal” and only “relatively monstrous” (*CPJ*, §26, 5:253); and likewise even the biggest works of architecture are produced by the *natural* powers of human beings, even if including our natural theoretical reason in the form of engineering ingenuity, so how could such things make palpable to us our allegedly *supernatural* power of pure practical reason and will?

There are answers to these objections, however. First, although Kant distinguishes between the free and pure beauty of things like flowers and foliage and even music without words and the adherent and impure beauty of racehorses and buildings aimed to serve particular purposes, and says that in the cases of adherent and impure beauty the intended purposes or functions of the objects *constrain* their possible forms and thus their possible beauty in certain ways, he never denies that adherent beauty *is* a kind of beauty. Instead, he seems to have begun with the case of pure beauty as the *simplest* case of beauty, in order identify something essential to all beauty, namely its connection to the free play of our cognitive powers, which can then be seen to figure in more complicated cases as well. In other words, starting with the case of pure beauty is important for Kant’s exposition, but does not make the more complex cases any the less cases of beauty. It seems only natural, pardon the pun, to assume that Kant has done the

¹⁰ See Abacı, “Kant’s Justified Dismissal,” pp. 242-4, and “Artistic Sublime Revisited,” p. 172, where he uses the phrase “mixed up.”

¹¹ Abacı, “Artistic Sublime Revisited,” p. 171.

same in the case of the sublime.¹² That is, he has begun with the experience of sublimity in its simplest form, an experience we have in response to nature without having to reconcile it with the purposiveness of any human artifact, in order to identify what is essential to any such experience, but has not provided nor intended to provide any reason why such a response might not happen in response to human artifacts as well, although in that case it may be more complex. His language – “if an example of” the sublime “is to be given which is fully appropriate [*anpassendes*] for the critique of the **aesthetic** power of judgment” – suggests that interpretation: he does not say that only the natural sublime is appropriate *tout court*, that only it is genuine, but rather that it is most appropriate *for the critique*, i.e., for the analysis of the experience. That leaves the door wide open to the thought that once the response has been analyzed in its simplest cases, then its essential features may be found in more complex cases as well. Then in particular we could apply the lessons of Kant’s subsequent analysis of artistic genius to the case of the sublime in art. Just as in the case of artistic beauty, the artist’s purposes and intentions, indeed the full panoply of them, are necessary for his production of his work but not sufficient as an explanation of its beauty, which requires the gift of nature as well, so in the case of a sublime work of art the artist’s intentions, to produce a poem or a building, an epic or a temple, an epic on the fall of Satan and mankind or a temple to Zeus, and so on, will be necessary to explain what the artist has produced but not sufficient, and in particular not sufficient to explain how the work strikes us as sublime, which will instead require that it strikes us as having a power that can only be explained by nature, not deduced from any determinate concepts.

Kant’s outright statement that in art the sublime must always be accompanied with the beauty of the representation itself likewise provides no argument that a work of art cannot trigger a genuine experience of sublimity. Kant says that without beauty in the artistic presentation or depiction the work will be “wild, coarse, and repulsive,” but he does not argue that the sublime must be what strikes us as wild, coarse, and repulsive, thus that something that is not wild, coarse, and repulsive cannot be sublime or more precisely trigger the experience of sublimity. What lies behind Kant’s remark is surely the characteristic conception of Baumgarten and such

¹² I have long argued this, going back to the Introduction to *Essays in Kantian Aesthetics*, edited by Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 6, and subsequently, for example, in “Beauty and Utility in Eighteenth-century Aesthetics,” originally in *Eighteenth Century Studies* 35 (2002): 439-53, reprinted in my *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 110-28, see pp. 118-22. Clewis has applied this claim to the case of the sublime, saying that Kant begins with “examples of pure sublimity...for mainly pedagogical reasons”; see “A Case for Kantian Artistic Sublimity,” p. 168.

followers as Georg Friedrich Meier and Moses Mendelssohn that in the case of art we respond to the qualities of both sign and what is signified, the visual or auditory “perfections” of a painting or a poem as well as the “perfections” of its content, for example the moral values a work might express and the emotional associations they might have. Mendelssohn, for example, says plainly that “the essence of the fine arts consists in an artful, sensuously perfect representation or in a sensuous perfection represented by art,” although clearly he intends a non-exclusive “or,” or an “and/or.” He continues that “This representation by art can be sensuously perfect even if, in nature, the object of the representation is neither good nor beautiful.”¹³ This leaves the door open for the beautiful representation of the sublime as well, and Kant seems to assume, certainly in the *Anthropology*, that art can walk right through that door. He may owe us an explanation of why the artistic representation of the sublime *must* be beautiful, and he only suggests the explanation that if not then the work may repel us before we can even begin to respond to its content; but he certainly has the conceptual resources to allow that there may be beautiful representations of sublime contents. As long, that is, as there is some way in which a work of art can have genuinely sublime content, or trigger the experience of the sublime; but we will come back to that.

The assumption that (most) art has representational content is the key to the third issue as well. To be sure, Kant interprets the experience of the sublime as one in which we have an aesthetic intimation of our relationship to nature: in the mathematical sublime, we are struck with the immensity of nature, in a way that threatens to defeat our imagination, but exhilarated by the realization, in an aesthetically suitable way, that our own reason can form an idea of this immensity and sets imagination the task of apprehending it; in the dynamical sublime, we are struck with the power of nature, but exhilarated by the realization, again in an aesthetically suitable way, that the freedom of our pure will is not compromised by that power. But once representation in art and its content are distinguished, there is no reason why the obviously artifactual character of the artistic sign must prevent nature itself from being its content, what art successfully connotes or puts us in mind of. The kind of poetry that Kant and his contemporaries invoke in their illustrations of both the beautiful and the sublime do exactly that. In the line that Kant quotes from Philipp Lorenz Withof, “The sun streamed forth, as tranquillity streams from

¹³ Moses Mendelssohn, “On the Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences,” in *Philosophical Writings*, translated by Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 169-91, at 172-3.

virtue” (*CPJ*, §49, 5:315), we certainly think of the sun and in this case its beauty or magnificence, not just of the poet’s words themselves. When Burke continues his passage from Milton by quoting “as when the sun new ris’n/ Looks through the horizontal misty air/Shorn of his beams; or from behind the moon/ In dim eclipse disastrous twilight sheds on half the nations (...)” (*Enquiry*, Part Two, section IV), we are (meant to be) moved, to feel the shudder of the sublime, by the thought of the sun gleaming through the mist, and in particular by the idea of the immensity of “half the nations,” that is, half of the enormous globe lit by the sun, though of course if we think about it for another moment, we realize that half the earth is but little compared to the immensity of the sun itself and the rest of the universe – and, on Kant’s account, we would be exhilarated by the (aesthetic) recognition that we can think of all of this. How exactly poetry puts us in mind of such things is, of course, a question; Burke himself thinks it is strictly by association, and Kant apparently does not. We will come back to that. The point for now is just that the twofold nature of so much art, the distinction between sign and signified, makes room for an artifact to put us in mind of nature and to trigger the sequences of imagination and thought that yield the experience of sublimity.

This brings us to the last of the points that I raised, which concerns especially an art that is not obviously representational and referential, namely architecture. Here the objection was that works of architecture are finite rather than infinite in extent, have form rather than being formless, and are obviously the product of the natural powers of human beings augmented in many cases by mechanical contrivances also engineered by human beings in accordance with the laws of physical nature – the laws of the lever and the screw, for example – so it may seem hard to explain how they could trigger the experience of the sublime. As Kant puts it, distinguishing between sculpture and architecture, while sculpture “presents corporeal concepts of things as they **could exist in nature**,” although as beautiful rather than sublime, works of architecture present, “with this intention but yet in an aesthetically purposive way, concepts of things that are possible **only through art**, and whose form has as its determining ground not nature but a voluntary end” (*CPJ*, §51, 5:322). Works of art are self-evidently artifacts with specific functions, among which representing anything other than themselves, such as vast or powerful nature, is not typically one. But here we need to remember that the objects in nature that trigger the experiences of the sublime, the mountain ranges and storms and all the rest, are not themselves actually formless and infinite in extent or power either; they merely *appear* that way to us, strike us that way, and thus trigger the chain of aesthetic ideas that Kant describes. The

question then becomes not whether works of architecture could actually be formless or infinite either, but only whether they could, for all that they are artifacts, trigger the same sort of experience as the sublime in nature. In his early references to the pyramids in the *Observations*, Kant clearly thought so. In his reference to the pyramids and St. Peter's in the third *Critique* itself, he does not explicitly say so, but neither does he explicitly deny it. He does say that in the case of the "colossal," a term that can surely apply to some architecture, "the mere presentation of a concept (...) is *almost* too great for all presentation" (*CPJ*, §26, 5:253), and thus the colossal would not be sublime – but he does not in fact say that architecture can at most be colossal but never sublime. If a work of architecture were to put us in mind of the kind of immensity of extent and power in the way that some views of nature do, then it could trigger the experience of sublimity. Whether any work of architecture can in fact do so, I would suggest, is not a conceptual question, to be settled by philosophical analysis, but a psychological question, to be answered by human experience.

In my view, then, while it may be correct that works of art cannot trigger a *pure* experience and judgment of the sublime, that does not mean they cannot trigger genuine experiences of the sublime. By Kant's own account, it is only borderline cases of art – borders for wallpaper and perhaps music without words -- that ever trigger pure aesthetic experience and judgment. Paradigmatic works of art always trigger impure aesthetic responses and judgments. But that does not mean that they do not trigger genuine aesthetic responses and judgments.

3 . *The Poetic Possibility of the Sublime*

One outstanding question is then how can poetry or other art put us in mind of the immensity of nature in a way that could trigger the experience of sublimity? Edmund Burke's answer to this question is by sheer association: the sound of a word (or its visual symbol, an inscription) that has become associated with some object in nature can trigger our emotional response to the latter without the necessity of first raising any image of that object in our minds (as John Locke had thought necessary).¹⁴ Once has committed himself to the view that the spirit of all art lies in aesthetic ideas, Kant has to explain how even music without words can trigger

¹⁴ See John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Book III, Chapter I, §2; edited by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 402.

such ideas, even though he had originally adduced music without words as an example of art whose beauty is independent of all concepts and content, and to do this he does invoke the theory of the association of ideas. Thus he appeals to contemporary *Affektenlehre* and writes that “every expression of language has, in context, a tone that is appropriate to its sense; that this tone more or less designates an affect of the speaker and conversely also produces one in the hearer, which then in turn arouses in the latter that is expressed in the language by means of such a tone,” and then argues that music can arouse not just affects but also the ideas that originally stimulated those affects by exploiting what are originally the tones of speech (*CPJ*, §53, 5:328).¹⁵ It is obvious that music with words, which has typically set poetry (or liturgy) to music, can convey ideas in whatever way poetry or speech more generally does, and is dependent upon it for at least much of its ideational content; what Kant has now done through *Affektenlehre* is make the content of music without words ultimately dependent upon the meaningfulness of speech as well. But this then brings us back to the question of how poetry or literature or speech more generally communicates ideas.

Kant does not offer a general theory of meaning of the sort we might find in an historical author such as Locke, let alone of the kind we might find in modern philosophy of language. He does say that in speech people communicate through “word,” “gesture,” and “tone,” or “articulation,” “gesticulation,” and “modulation,” and that “Only the combination of these three kinds of communication constitutes the speakers complete communication[,] For thought, intuition, and sentiment are thereby conveyed to the other simultaneously and united” (*CPJ*, §51, 5:321). The last remark suggests that in speech we can communicate concepts and ideas (“thought”), the experiences on which our thoughts might be based (“intuition”), and how we feel about both of those, or the emotions we may have in response to such experience and thought (“sentiment”). In Kant’s view, poetry is the most complete art because it most fully exploits all three dimensions of communication. It might initially seem that he supposes that other arts do not exploit all three dimensions of communication, specifically that the visual arts, including painting, sculpture, and architecture, as well as the visual rather than musical aspect of the complex art of dance, communicate only what can be communicated by gesture or gesticulation, namely intuition but not concepts, while the arts of sensory play, music and an art

¹⁵ On Kant’s use of *Affektenlehre*, see Samantha Matherne, “Kant’s Expressive Theory of Music,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72 (2014): 129-46,

of the play of colors, communicate only what can be communicated through tone or modulation, namely sentiment or emotion but not concepts and thus not any determinate idea of the objects of such emotions. But Kant's ensuing discussion belies such an assumption, for in fact he says that the visual arts of painting as well as the "plastic" arts comprising sculpture and architecture (even including landscape architecture) "make shapes in space into expressions of ideas" (5:322), and as we have already seen he holds that music can communicate ideas not just in the obvious way, when it has words, but also through emotional associations even when it lacks text. The difference between music with text and that without might be that the former first raises ideas and through that triggers emotions while the latter first triggers emotions and only through that raises ideas; but both do raise ideas as well as emotions. So Kant does assume that all media of art can raise ideas as well as suggest experiences (intuitions) and communicate emotions; therefore all arts at least in principle can raise ideas of nature and trigger emotions associable with our ideas of nature. Thus there is no reason in principle why any art could not trigger the experience of the sublime, even though Kant, like his contemporaries, obviously assumes that poetry is the art most likely to do so. But the one thing he does not attempt to do is to explain how words themselves are associated with ideas by their speakers and their authors and raise ideas in their auditors and readers. Presumably he does not think that they do so just by association, because he mentions association only in the case of music, and moreover his explanation of association in the case of music would be circular if words too conveyed ideas only by association. So he must think that words are connected directly to images (intuitions) and concepts (including ideas) in our minds. Maybe he simply thinks that this is too obvious to need saying.

Even if we take it to be non-problematic that words or for that matter other artistic media can raise ideas of nature sufficient in turn to trigger experiences of the sublime, one question still remains, namely how would such experiences triggered by art satisfy Kant's requirement of *self-referentiality* for the sublime? Everyone in the eighteenth century assumed that poetic words, visual images, and so on could raise ideas of the immensity of nature, the power of its creator, and the virtue or "moral magnitude" of heroes, real or fictional. But Kant insists that the experience of the sublime for each of us is ultimately an experience of the unlimited capacity of *our own* theoretical and practical reason, although that idea must be presented aesthetically rather than conceptually. But all that is needed here is the thought that an aesthetic presentation of the immensity of nature or the moral magnitude of another can lead us, in an aesthetic and

therefore non-rule-governed or non-deductive way, to the realization of our own power of theoretical reason to form the very idea of the immensity of nature and our own power of practical reason to do the right thing no matter what the threats (or blandishments) of mere nature might be. This seems a natural enough chain of thoughts, or feelings -- again, keep in mind that Kant is actually analyzing a species of feeling, sentiment in his language, and that the analysis of its content that he offers is the philosopher's, not necessarily the actual subject's. This natural assumption is evident from the outset of Kant's work. In the *Observations*, he argues that in tragedy -- a paradigmatic form of poetry for many in Kant's time and well beyond -- "it is the feeling for the **sublime** (...) that is touched." He then continues that in tragedy

there is displayed magnanimous sacrifice for the well-being of another, bold resolve in the face of danger, and proven fidelity. There love is melancholic, tender, and full of esteem; the misfortune of others stirs sympathetic feelings in the bosom of the of the onlooker and allows his magnanimous heart to beat for the need of others. He is gently moved *and feels the dignity of his own nature*. (*OBS*, Second Section, 2:212; emphasis added)

The final clause makes it clear that the audience for tragedy does not just feel sympathy for its suffering but braves heroes, but feels its own moral capacity as well. This is the characteristic marker for the Kantian sublime. Again, there may be a psychological question whether this really happens in response to art, but there is no conceptual barrier to its possibility.

