
The Sublime Paradox:

Glosses on § 23. *Transition from the Faculty for Judging the Beautiful to that for Judging the Sublime*

Boyan MANCHEV

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 23. *Transition from the Faculty for Judging the Beautiful to that for Judging the Sublime*

[...]

The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in limitation; the sublime, by contrast, is to be found in a formless object insofar as *limitlessness* is represented in it, or at its instance, and yet it is also thought as a totality: so that the beautiful seems to be taken as the presentation of an indeterminate concept of the understanding, but the sublime as that of a similar concept of reason. Thus the satisfaction is connected in the first case with the representation of *quality*, but in this case with that of *quantity*. Also the latter pleasure is very different in kind from the former, in that the former (the beautiful) directly brings with it a feeling of the promotion of life, and hence is compatible with charms and an imagination at play, while the latter (the feeling of the sublime) is a pleasure that arises only indirectly, being generated, namely, by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them; hence as an emotion it seems to be not play but something serious in the activity of the imagination. Hence it is also incompatible with charms, and, since the mind is not merely attracted by the object, but is also always reciprocally repelled by it, the satisfaction in the sublime does not so much

contain positive pleasure as it does admiration or respect, i.e., it deserves to be called negative pleasure.

The most important and intrinsic difference between the sublime and the beautiful, however, is this: that if, as is appropriate, we here consider first only the sublime in objects of nature (that in art is, after all, always restricted to the conditions of agreement with nature), natural beauty (the self-sufficient kind) carries with it a purposiveness in its form, through which the object seems as it were to be predetermined for our power of judgment, and thus constitutes an object of satisfaction in itself, whereas that which, without any rationalizing, merely in apprehension, excites in us the feeling of the sublime, may to be sure appear in its form to be contrapurposive for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our faculty of presentation, and as it were doing violence to our imagination, but is nevertheless judged all the more sublime for that.

But from this one immediately sees that we express ourselves on the whole incorrectly if we call some object of nature sublime, although we can quite correctly call very many of them beautiful; for how can we designate with an expression of approval that which is apprehended in itself as contrapurposive? We can say no more than that the object serves for the presentation of a sublimity that can be found in the mind; for what is properly sublime cannot be contained in any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason, which, though no presentation adequate to them is possible, are provoked and called to mind precisely by this inadequacy, which does allow of sensible presentation. Thus the wide ocean, enraged by storms, cannot be called sublime. Its visage is horrible; and one must already have filled the mind with all sorts of ideas if by means of such an intuition it is to be put in the mood for a feeling which is itself sublime, in that the mind is incited to abandon sensibility and to occupy itself with ideas that contain a higher purposiveness.¹

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 128-129.

[...]

My aim in this short experimental intervention, taking as starting point the first paragraph of the Kantian *Analytic of the Sublime*, is to recompose and even alter the established cartographies of its conceptual landscape by means of metacritical operations, elaborating, mobilizing and thus intensifying the (quasi-psychological) mechanisms described or implied by Kant as structural features of the examined category of the sublime.

The Sublime *Modus Operandi*

The affect of the sublime — it is, before all, an *affect* — is the effect of an internal tension between different faculties — tension between reason and the power of imagination and presentation, related to the fact that the imagination is incapable of grasping, but also of producing an image adequate to the sublime idea. The latter in Kant is connected to the terrible power of the wild nature (“it is mostly rather in its chaos or in its wildest and most unruly disorder and devastation, if only it allows a glimpse of magnitude and might, that it excites the ideas of the sublime,” § 23, p. 130), although the sublime affect could only be the *sublimation* of the terror caused by the monstrosity of nature; it is not immanent to the object, Kant insists: “It is also evident from this that true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the one who judges, not in the object in nature, the judging of which occasions this disposition in it. And who would want to call sublime shapeless mountain masses towering above one another in wild disorder with their pyramids of ice, or the dark and raging sea, etc.? But the mind feels itself elevated in its own judging if, in the consideration of such things, without regard to their form, abandoning itself to the imagination and to a reason which, although it is associated with it entirely without any determinate end, merely extends it, it nevertheless finds the entire power of the imagination inadequate to its ideas” (§ 26, pp. 139-140). The question then is: if the sublime consists of the ideas of reason only, completely detached from all sensible intuition (“without regard to

their form”), how to explain the fact that the latter is always of the same order (or *disorder*) — facing the *wildest and most unruly disorder*, the threatening elementary powers, the angry ocean, the abyssal mountain cliffs, the raging volcanoes, the devastating earthquakes? If the power of imagination fails in front of these terrifying forces, is the sublime the effect of an auto-affective operation, is it self-satisfactory and also self-sufficient (and in this comparable to the beautiful)?

(Few years later, Romanticism will shed its dark light on this mechanism exemplifying it as psychic machine of the sublime, thus radicalizing Kant’s power of imagination as productive *ontopoietic* power, in the perspective of a generalized *ontopoietics*. Thus, in its dark obsessions, casting their shadows already in the Gothic novel, Romanticism will reveal the double foundation of the affect of the sublime, and of the sublime affectation as well. On that slippery — ghostly — ground we could establish a direct connection to the romantic category of *das Unheimliche*: the terror from the abyss inside, the horror of the inappropriability of the interior as radical exteriority, and from there — the terror of being possessed by the ghosts of the crypt inside the body, by the ghostly inhabitants, which execute their obscene deeds at night, by the dead unburied ancestors, whose impulses our bodies-machine continues to enact. Therefore, the *unheimlich* would appear as material “substratum” of the sublime, as the affective “matter” of the affective “form” sublime — the sublime and therefore paradoxical formless form which sublimates the chaos and the unruly disorder of nature, that has still the power to possess the intimacy of our sleeping mind as archaic ghost.)

In fact, in the structure of the sublime we are facing a complex, paradoxical dependency: the more the force does violence to the imagination or to the presentative faculty, the more it appears sublime. The more imagination fails, the more the experience of the sublime is *efficient*. The paradoxical logic of the sublime reaches its heights with the affirmation that, although no adequate presentation is possible, the very inadequacy could be represented, or made present. Sublime would be presentation by — and perhaps *of* — inadequacy itself (“though no presentation adequate to them is possible, are provoked and called to mind precisely by this inadequacy, which does allow of sensible

presentation”).

This paradoxical structure is correlative to other complex concepts, based on the same intensive or conflictual schema: the *negative pleasure* [*die negative Lust*] — the affective resource of the affect of the sublime (anticipated in a way by Aristotle in the fourth chapter of the *Poetics*) and the *counter-finality* [*Zweckwidrig(keit)*], implying paradoxical teleological mechanism. Where this negative pleasure comes from? The ocean is terrible, but it appears sublime. Why is it sublime? Because it is an outburst of life, a “momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them.” It is a pitch of affect, a climax, the maximum intensity of a force. The sublime *idea* is thus connected to the complex process of what I will describe as *meta-affection*; even if not auto-affective, the category of *negative pleasure* apparently refers to a reflexive experience — to the reflexive experience of pleasure, enjoying itself in the animation of the faculties of mind, of their polemic intensification. Thus the terrible ocean is sublime because it *animates* ideas: it is the cause of a higher finality, the outburst of sublime life beyond the sensible experience; a sublime life of reason, which projects back on the brutal power of the former the *higher finality* (or, according to the Guyer’s translation, the *higher purposiveness*) in question. Let’s hear in any case the adjective “higher” not as “superior” but as more intense, as a higher degree of intensity of the power.

The Counter-Finality: The Force of *Apeiron*, or the Storm of Philosophy

Paradoxically, the first name of the supposed *higher finality* should be *counter-finality*. The angry ocean is limitless and indefinite, and as such, as the raw power of the element, it offers the formless image of the raw power of the first abstract pre-universal philosophical concept, emerging itself as a *pirate* Aphrodite from the oceanic waves of the sensual experience and imagination, from their archaic *poiëtic* power: the figure-concept of *apeiron*.

I have already claimed in an experimental essay on the origins of

philosophy that Anaximander's *apeiron* is not only, in accordance with its doxological interpretation, limitless and indefinite, but that it appears and *acts* as the active opposite of limit and finality:

Apeiron, the first name of the element not only of the world but also of philosophy, was invented by Anaximander, the wanderer towards the unknown. Anaximander, the leader of a Milesian expedition to a new colony resulting in the foundation of the city of Apollonia (Antheia) on the Black sea coast, was a sea wanderer. The Black sea was not yet black at the time in which there Anaximander invented *apeiron*, wandering at the limits of the known. The inventor of *apeiron* was *peirates* (we should hear the etymological connection between *pirate*, *peirates*, the one who wanders to the limits, who *ex-periments*, and *a-peiron*, the limit-less).

Apeiron is limitless and indefinite — but it is also the active opposite of limit and finality. He is *counter-final*, according to Kant's paradoxical term from his discussion on the sublime (isn't Kant injecting the Platonic harmony of forms with Heraclitean-Anaximandrian dynamic and formless, transforming intensity: with the polemic counter-finality of the Heraclitean fire or Anaximandrian *apeiron*?).

Philosophy was not invented with the idea of finality of the world, but with the idea of counter-finality. Philosophy is the possibility to think of counter-finality. It is the potentiality of a counter-final thought.²

Hence, the idea of counter-finality belongs to Kant, the greater thinker of finality of all times. According to Kant's words "the feeling of the sublime (...) appear[s] in its form to be contrapurposive [*zweckwidrig*] for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our faculty of presentation." Obviously, the "direct" formulation *counter-finality* is mine (the noun *Zweckwidrigkeit* doesn't appear in the *Third Critique*), and I have coined it for the sake of the conceptual mobilization

2. Modified paragraph from the essay: Boyan Manchev, "The Dangers of Philosophy," in *Inaesthetics*, 4: *Philosophy!*, Berlin: Merve Verlag, 2014.

discussed also here. However, I do believe that this conceptual formula is adequate to the “higher” finality which Kant claims for; it reveals its (in-)tensive grounds, and the intensity of its enigmatic, paradoxical logic.

What would counter-finality be in terms of the teleological faculty of judgment? Clearly, it acts against the interest of the senses; it suggests a possibility of a general economy of finality. The idea of counter-finality is a powerful effect of the machinery of conflict, persistent in the *Analytic of the Sublime*. The affect of the sublime is a *stasic, polemic* concept: it is implying tension as well as intensity (of course, *polemos* means “war”; and the figure of violence and war appears not surprisingly in the *Analytic*). This polemic conceptual node is crucial to understand not only the sublime, but the *reason* — or the excess of reason — behind this Kantian category.

The Sublime Catastrophe

In the experience of the sublime we are not only and simply confronting the limitless, or infinity; we are confronting *two types* of infinity, two types of voids, of terrifying, monstrous, formless emptiness. The one is the one of nature and the other is the one of Reason. Hence, when we speak of terror, we should speak of two types of terror as well. On the one hand, there is the terror of the wild power, of the *Macht* of raw nature; on the other is *the monopolist of the legitimate violence* (if I playfully use the Weberian formula of the state) — which is, of course, Reason. Reason does violence to the senses: reason itself is violence. Therefore, the affect of the sublime is not only related to the raw *Macht* of nature, but also to the reflexive terror of reason facing itself, its own power. Not only because reason is terrorizing the power of sensual intuition, imagination or presentation but also because reason is terrified to face its own void: the abyss of Freedom and Law (or maybe the abyss of the spiritual anarchy, of the disorder and chaos of reason?). This powerful and contradictory affect is the complex mechanism opening to the realm of morality. Its discharge is the step over the threshold of practical Reason, or the catastrophe allowing its

new constitution on a higher level of complexity and higher degree of intensity.

Hence the category of the sublime acquires a crucial, not only critical but also metacritical value: it allows for retroactive understanding of the Kantian critical architectonics. The very fact that the sublime occupies retroactively such crucial place could only suggest that the sublime is *the* category, which brings forward the moment of tension, of the conflictual, even immanently polemic structure, the experience of internal split and raising intensity. The underlying polemic structure which, according to our experimental hypothesis, is constitutive as the groundless ground of a new realm: only such tension or intensity, such conflict or struggle, could open the realm of Freedom.