

but goes beyond the bounds of experience by displaying them with a completeness of which there is no *example* in nature?.

- <sup>3</sup> Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p 147, quoted in Peter Winch, *Trying to Make Sense*, p 122.

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contrasts with Platonic calm) gives way to the image of drowning and being lost in matter or the flesh, the vision gone, but the sea's surface can be rent and is disturbed and tormented by the sound of bells, the great Cathedral gong of the city of Byzantium, intimations of higher things, of transcendence. Transcendence here must mean more than the experience of a perspective, but the going beyond one condition or state of being to another, inhabiting that perspective, and Yeats describes the process, of 'an agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve', of the smithies of the emperor breaking the bitter furies of complexity and forging the tempered, hammered gold of the soul's simplicity.

At the beginning of this paper I said that in writing about the sublime Kant had seemed to capture the sense of a perennial human experience. In retrospect, it seems more plausible to suggest that Kant offers us a religious or spiritual vision rather than a moral one. Some philosophers will resist what looks like a universal objective morality as determining the scope of artistic genius. But the argument about morality must be left to another place. I had also asked whether the Kantian vision was genuinely profound or merely illusory (though maybe it could be both). Is there indeed, in Winch's words, 'a standard from the point of view of which the disorder and the wretchedness which so largely characterise human life in its fundamental aspects may be assessed and come to terms with'? It has to be said that Kant writes with vexing serenity about the ideas of reason that are set in motion by the sublime and by the work of artistic genius. But, on the other hand, he makes no claim to knowledge, only to possibilities of thought. On the other hand, the more anguished Yeats seems to project a knowledge derived from experience.

Perhaps it has to be remembered that the rescuing dolphin comes only in the desperate last moments of the poet's call, as we are told.

This paper is dedicated to the memory of the late Professor M.P. Rege.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> References are to the Meredith translation, with some minor alterations by the author.
- <sup>2</sup> '...in einer Vollständigkeit sinnlich zu machen, für die sich in der Natur kein Beispiel findet. Meredith's translation slightly obscures an interesting repetition in Kant's German of the word for an example (*Beispiel*): 'the poet shows us things which we find *examples* of in our experience, death, envy, love and so on,

replaces itself with its implicit, associated surroundings, with images of Hades, the place of shades, then the image of a tomb, a mummy, an embalmed corpse, which shifts between Egyptian and Greek associations fusing into one another, an unravelling of life but also a thread through the labyrinth, a path out of Hades, ritual death and the mysteries, coalescing into the shocking mouth that has no moisture and no breath, into the notion that death and decay can themselves quicken the repelled imagination to the thought that even the negative associations of death can be unwound, and show a way back to life, not the life that has been left, but to a state he calls the superhuman, death-in-life and life-in-death.

These images track an interior movement between desolation and defiant hope, but they do so by a sequence of images that are natural objects of these mental states. Earlier, I dwelt on one way in which aesthetic idea can relate to the ideas of reason, one in which they offer themselves as objects and embodiments of those ideas. But there is another way in which they may 'set the faculty of reason in motion', in the way to be found, for instance, in the final stanza of *Byzantium*, in lines surrounding the two I quoted earlier:

*Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,  
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,  
The golden smithies of the Emperor!  
Marbles of the dancing floor  
Break bitter furies of complexity,  
Those images that yet  
Fresh images beget,  
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.*

In Greek legend the rescuing dolphin comes only with the poet, Arion's, desperate final song before he drowns, in the sea of matter, perhaps; the dolphin which though itself of 'mire and blood' can rent the sea's surface briefly, and have sight of land, and take Arion to the shores of his own element. Yeats has already written of 'all that man is', of 'all mere complexities', 'the fury and the mire of human veins', 'all complexities of fury', of breaking 'bitter furies of complexity' and shows us with a poet's passion that is absent from Kant's prose the intensity of the experience by which we undergo the struggle between the flesh and spirit, a struggle which includes the very recognition of the presence or the loss of soul. We have in the dolphin—and in the images that it begets— an image not of 'awakening' to a moral and spiritual dimension of life, but of rescue from the one and salvation by the other. The repetition of 'fury', 'mire', 'complexity' (an Augustinian *angst* that

we need to ask how these particular formations arise and develop. For how is one supposed to gain even the *sense* of 'a standard' by which to assess and come to terms with the dense human realities of disorder and wretchedness, especially if one is immersed in them? How does one attain the *sense of a possibility*?

The idea of the sense of such a standard seems consonant with the Kantian notion of an awakening of the faculty of reason by the work of art or the sublime, allowing us at least to glimpse a perspective, however briefly, from which we see 'the world', in the ethical and spiritual sense of that word, as a limited whole and from a point beyond it, precisely the call of an ethical and spiritual life. A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains, as we have seen, '*All that man is ... etc*', but it also to that extent gives us the idea of a perspective on '*The fury and the mire of human veins*'. The cathedral dome stands as the image of a standard by which to judge, 'all that man is', but that cannot be wholly right since this monument of unageing intellect itself represents a supreme human achievement, so that we have to correct our description of what it 'disdains', not '*All that man is*', but '*All mere complexities*' (hinting at the submerged, unrealised 'simplicity' of the soul, a simplicity of hammered gold and gold-enamelling only achieved in the furnaces of the Emperor's smithies), '*The fury and the mire of human veins*'. Or, if we stay with '*All that man is*', then we have no choice but to 'hail the superhuman':

*Before me floats an image, man or shade,  
Shade more than man, more image than a shade;  
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth  
May unwind the winding path;  
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath  
Breathless mouths may summon;  
I hail the superhuman;  
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.*

These eerie lines with their multiple condensations, fractured syntax and fusions of sense that coherently collapse one thought into another, follow the slipping of consciousness into dream from the still unpurged fury and mire of human veins as at first the negative and only possible contrast with 'all that man is', so that the image of a man can only be that of one whose veins have been drained of life, in other words, a ghost or shade, but more image than a shade, because what floats before the poet's mind, who is describing both the forging of himself and of his own poem, is an image which allows other, connected, images to arise out of and reverberate around itself, as it shifts and dislocates and

The Gospel contains a conception of human life, not a theology ... Earthly things are the criterion of spiritual things ... Only spiritual things are of value, but only physical things have a verifiable existence. Therefore, the value of the former can only be verified as an illumination projected onto the latter.<sup>3</sup>

This seems to bear on Kant's description of the experience of a reordering of one's priorities, as an aspect of one's experience of the sublime or of art, but also puts pressure on it. The reordering he talks about is not simply a matter of an *experience*, though it *can* be a revelatory experience, as Kant indicates in his own way. But revelatory experiences take the form of a vision which you can then fail to live up or lose, and there is a clear distinction between the revelatory experience of the possibility of transcending temporal or worldly desires (the flesh) and the embodiment of that transcendence in a life. A person's demeanour towards 'earthly things' is the criterion of their spiritual condition. But let us return to this distinction between an intimated and a lived transcendence. The difficulty of the idea is brought out in the following passage from Winch:

expressions used with a religious emphasis may serve to articulate a standard from the point of view of which the disorder and wretchedness which so largely characterise human life in its fundamental aspects may be assessed and come to terms with.

He adds, significantly, 'Though what sort of 'coming to terms with' this is, I have neither the space nor the comprehension to say more about'. This is not a confession of philosophical obtuseness, but rather acknowledges, with a humility not common among philosophers, the possibility of a condition that lies beyond his reach. His remark implicitly reminds us that the point of view or perspective that marks the standard he refers to is not so easily put on or taken off as an item of clothing. It is rather that when we talk of the Kantian ideas we are talking of *formations of subjectivity* that cannot be assumed or discarded *at will* by an independent or unaffected self that stands unaltered over against them. Kant talks about them being 'awakened', about their strengthening and extending the mind or sensibility, but not about the perilous process of their embodiment. But if we take that seriously, then

we are to see things from the position by which they are determined. The 'concept' descriptively determines its object, in this case the artistic representation, and what the concept is not adequate to, what eludes its grasp, is the activated train of associated thoughts and isomorphic images that centre round the *Vollständigkeit* of the representation, but is not part of its description, and cannot itself be finally described, because it is essentially indefinite and open-ended. Although the representation *satisfies* the concept, as it were, it is not *comprehended* by the concept. The concept under which it falls is not adequate to its productive reality *or* to its manifest or latent content. It is a complex particular which exemplifies a complex *universal*, or set of universals, which latter can, indeed, *only* be evoked, remaining resonantly unspoken and implicit, the crowded background set of instances which determine the sense of the particular. The luminous presence of the one example sparks the quickening of the cognitive faculties into an involuntary perception of the realities it exemplifies and evokes. There is no other way for the universal to be present. The universal cannot, of course, be described, but is present only in its open-ended and often surprising range of tokens. Frequently it is the work of art itself that represents the new, the surprising and baffling token, which puts the mind under pressure to find the connections and similarities, the *world* that makes sense of it, which then irrupts into the imagination in a sudden release.

This notion of a 'world'—or sense of a universe—though not strictly Kantian, is a possible development of the notion of *Vollständigkeit*. It also allows us the idea of a more fully formed object of the awakened idea. The artistic representation presents a world which is the object of ideas, and those ideas shed a light on it; that illumination by ideas can also be shown *in* the representation, which can express an attitude to the very world that is represented. Again, this enhances the notion of that *Vollständigkeit* or 'completeness' that is supposedly not available in nature: it is the expressiveness in the representation of an attitude or perspective on the human experience.

## 5

A well-known passage from the writing of Simone Weil might be usefully rehearsed here, since it provides us with an image for understanding what might be involved in having a moral or spiritual idea of fame or of other temporal things:

thought, an estimate of the 'world' from a point beyond it as it were. There is an analogy in his mind, determined no doubt by the fact that for him our moral nature is located in the noumenal realm, outside the 'world' (and the ethical sense of that expression is obviously relevant here), between the relationship of noumena and phenomena, on the one hand, and the free humanity of our rational will and our determined or conditioned human nature on the other. And just as the experience of the sublime can awaken the faculty of thought that *estimates* nature in its totality as appearance, so the poetic representation can *show* us or otherwise put us in touch with a moral or even spiritual estimate of our determined human nature and the way it conducts itself: an estimate that is unavailable unless this dimension is awakened.

The poetic achievement 'invigorates the mind by letting it feel its faculty ... of regarding and estimating nature as phenomenon in the light of aspects which nature does not afford us in experience, either for sense or understanding'—or, perhaps less ponderously, and resuscitating the 'dead metaphors' in Kant's prose, 'it strengthens the mind and lets it feel its power ... of looking at (*betrachten*) and judging nature as appearance (*Erscheinung*) from points of view (*nach Ansichten*) which it does not itself offer either for sense or understanding'. The point of view belongs to the sphere of Reason.

On several occasions Kant talks about the 'inadequacy of the concept' or of language to the aesthetic or rational ideas. The 'much thought' said to be induced by the poet's representation is not to be understood as part of a further conceptual determination or description of the object represented, but rather as *content* of the free play of imagination and understanding ('the quickening of the cognitive faculties') into responsive reflective activity. The reason that 'language can never get quite on level terms' with the aesthetic idea or 'render [it] completely intelligible' (§ 49, p 174) seems to be that the function of language is to give expression to our conceptual determinations of objects, and the wealth of thought induced by the artistic representation is not part of this, and since no concept is adequate to it then neither therefore is language, though Kant is operating with a restricted conception of language that his own incipient expressionism clearly undermines.

It is not merely the burgeoning and augmentation of a responsive mental activity that defies conceptual expression, but also the perspectives embodied in and determining the form of the representation that give rise to that responsiveness. Perspectives can be 'named', of course, but they have to be inhabited rather than described if

fame. In that case, what is distinctive or interesting about what Kant is trying to say?

It is at least clear that people have *different* conceptions or ideas of fame. But none of this captures the particular perspective that seems to be implicit in Kant's account, carried over from the experience of the sublime to that of art, of seeing the phenomena (the way things appear to us) as a determined totality. To have the idea of fame in a Kantian sense is coming, in Arnold's phrase, to see it clearly and see it whole, but from a point of view not available *in* experience from a point of view, crucially, not available in a life in which the faculty of ideas (soul) remains dormant.

But what kind of contrast is involved here? When Kant talks about ideas in the context of the sublime and of genius, he is mostly talking about *moral* ideas, so the contrast is one in which, on the one hand, there are views of the human condition (*all that man is*) that are internal reflections of our temporal or 'worldly' desires (*the fury and the mire of human veins*) and, on the other, one in which we see all of this as a totality, in that vision of sublimity that reorders our priorities and converts our attitudes. To put it another way, we are talking about an estimation of the significance of fame that depends upon the recognition of the *final*, perhaps absolute significance of something else, which, when we are awakened to it, puts fame and the rest precisely in their place. Kant's characterisation of poetry in §53 may be helpful here:

*Poetry ... expands the mind by giving freedom to the imagination and by offering, from among the boundless multiplicity of possible forms accordant with a given concept, to whose bounds it is restricted, that one which couples with the presentation of the concept a wealth of thought (Gedankenfülle) to which no verbal expression is completely adequate, and by thus rising aesthetically to ideas. It invigorates the mind by letting it feel its faculty—free, spontaneous, and independent of nature—of regarding and estimating nature as phenomenon in the light of aspects which nature of itself does not afford us in experience, either for sense or understanding, and of employing it accordingly in behalf of, and as a sort of schema for, the supersensible.*

The proposition that what we experience are appearances or *phainomena* is not grounded *in* the experience, but is an estimate of it grounded in



particular completeness. But how are we to understand this *Vollständigkeit*, which seems interesting but also opaque?

It is plausible to suppose that Kant offers us here a seminal account of metaphoricity, and that the *Vollständigkeit* that is within the power of ‘talent’ as well as ‘genius’ consists in the evocativeness or metaphoric density of the particular representation, its ability to call forth a ‘wealth of thought’ in the sense of aspects, associations and connections that allow us a completer view than is *normally* available to perception: (yet this claim seems inconsistent with Kant’s later claim (opening §53) that beauty in nature is also the expression of aesthetic ideas). Such representations are, to use a phrase of Yeats,

*Those images that yet  
Fresh images beget*

The poet gives us ‘the sense of a universe’ as Valéry says.

So far we have a plausible candidate for poetic *talent*—the ability to deploy a metaphor or exemplary image—but what converts this to Kantian genius? Kant is sparing in what he counts as *creative*, and what he says relates it to our experience of the sublime: it consists in finding the representation that ‘sets in motion the faculty of intellectual ideas’. It is a *particular* ‘completeness’ that constitutes genius, a *particular* aesthetic idea or representation that awakens ideas of reason. There seem to be at least two possibilities here.

#### 4

One is that the creativity consists in producing a representation that awakens the faculty of ideas by offering it a suitable *object*. The creative, as opposed to the merely talented, artist will offer us a representation of fame, for instance, that awakens us to ideas by arousing and attracting to itself an *idea of fame*. It could do this by embodying the idea in the representation, displaying fame in a certain light (in the way an attitude to fame may be expressed in a certain demeanour towards it). The representation allows us to see fame in a way that accords with the primal Kantian experience of the sublime, in which we undergo a reversal or reordering of what we attach importance to.

We could go further, and say that an idea can determine the form of the experience of fame—and that form of experience can itself be represented by the poet—as a certain, Stoic estimation of fame determines a demeanour of indifference towards it. However, it may be objected here that we all already operate with *some* idea or conception of

Kant's account of artistic genius).

So the poet's representations must not only be of the realities of the human experience of death and other aspects of the human condition, but be such as to display a perspective on them that, to put it obliquely for the moment, *belongs* to the awakening of ideas. Kant's examples divide between rational ideas of what could not be experienced at all (God, the soul, etc), and ideas of what *can* be encountered in experience. In the former case, neither the alleged reality nor the rational idea of it can be 'presented' in experience, except in symbolic form; in the latter case, one may be tempted to say, it is only the *idea* that lies beyond the form of any possible experience.

But it is perhaps more complicated than that. When Kant talks of the realities of the human condition he claims that the poet makes examples manifest to sense with a 'completeness' (*Vollständigkeit*) not available in the examples we encounter in experience, and so it seems to be in this sense that the poet 'ventures beyond the bounds of experience'. However, he then comments that 'this faculty (sc. of aesthetic ideas) ... regarded solely on its own account, is properly no more than a *talent* (of the imagination)' (my italics). And then he offers a significant contrast, which reflects the distinction between poetic *genius* and mere talent:

If, now, we attach to a concept a representation of the imagination belonging to its presentation, but inducing solely on its own account such a wealth of thought (*so viel zu denken*) as would never admit of comprehension in a definite concept, and, as a consequence, giving aesthetically an unbounded expansion to the concept itself, then the imagination here displays a creative activity, and it puts the faculty of intellectual ideas (reason) into motion—a motion, at the instance of a representation, towards an extension of thought, that while germane, no doubt, to the concept of the object, exceeds what can be laid hold of in that representation or clearly expressed.

However, this passage is not entirely clear about where mere talent ends and genius begins—the common term is the *Vollständigkeit* of the poetic representation—and perhaps Kant is not very interested in defining the moment. The poet seems to show no more than 'talent' in displaying aspects of the human condition with some sort of 'completeness' that is not available in nature. Perhaps genius offers a

(*Erfahrungsgrenze*) depends on what we take to count as ‘experience’ at all, and Kant’s own doctrine of experience is notoriously attenuated. In the *Critique*, however, a more ‘saturated’ notion is sometimes to be glimpsed, as we shall shortly see. But the first thing to notice is the ambiguity in Kant’s formulation.

The notion of ‘what lies beyond the bounds of experience’ might be taken to refer to what lies beyond the form of our experience as *presently* constituted (so that it makes sense to transcend or pass beyond it, into another form of experience), or it could refer to what lies beyond the form of any possible experience (so that it makes no sense to talk of going beyond it). As for the latter, however, Kant seems to envisage two rather different kinds of possibility, if we look at his examples:

The poet ventures to interpret to sense the rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, hell, eternity, creation, &c. Or, again, as to things of which examples occur in experience, e.g. death, envy, and all vices, as also love, fame and the like, transgressing the limits of experience he attempts with the aid of an imagination which emulates the display of reason in its attainment of a maximum, to body them forth to sense with a completeness (*Vollständigkeit*) of which nature offers no parallel.<sup>2</sup>

Earlier in this paragraph Kant has claimed that the aesthetic ideas produced by the poet are to be thought of as *ideas* precisely because they ‘seek to approach a presentation of rational concepts’. But now, although he goes on to list some explicitly rational ideas—those of hell, eternity, etc—he continues his list with ‘what we find examples of in experience’—death, envy, the vices, etc., and these realities of human experience (here is the more saturated notion) are hardly themselves ‘ideas’. But since the poet presents aesthetic ideas that represent these latter realities too, on Kant’s account, they must be taken to ‘seek to approach a presentation of rational concepts’ in their case also, so we need to think, not just of death, envy, etc., as things we experience or undergo, but also of *intellectual or rational ideas* of them. I suggest also that these ideas, *suitably appropriated*, may determine and alter the *form* of our experience, in precisely the way adumbrated in the account of the sublime, where the awakening of the faculty of reason is said to reorder how we relate to things. (The account of the sublime and its effect upon us in reordering our priorities is the ground note that sounds also in

(*Darstellung*) of such (rational) concepts as those of God, the soul, or creation, for instance, or indeed that of the supersensible substrate of all phenomena, which is not for Kant an object of knowledge: we do not *know* that there is such an intelligible substrate, we can only think the idea, an idea, though, which gives us a perspective on what does come within experience, as we shall see.

## 2

In *Byzantium* Yeats writes:

*A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains*

*All that man is*

*All mere complexities,*

*The fury and the mire of human veins.*

The starlit, moonlit dome is an evocative image: the image of a cathedral dome represented as illuminated by the light of stars and moon. So how might such an image mediate what Kant calls ideas of reason, seek to ‘approach a presentation’ of them? The poem already seems to offer a symbolic counterpart to what Kant has sought to articulate philosophically about the nature of the work of art. The burnished surface of this ‘monument of unageing intellect’ makes it suitable for reflecting and gathering a light from a distant source, which cannot be seen by day, and which cannot penetrate the denser darkness of the surrounding streets below, the place of the unpurged images of day, except through the medium of the reflecting dome itself, which causes us to look up and then beyond, and which draws attention to the unearthly quality of the light it reflects rather than illuminating the darkness of the familiar street. This light that attracts us and shows us the possibility of a point of view that ‘disdains’ ‘*All that man is, All mere complexities, The fury and the mire of human veins*’, and allows us to ‘resist’, to use Kant’s verb (*widerstehen*).

The power of genius, then, ‘presents’ (presumably to an audience) those representations of the imagination that Kant calls aesthetic ideas, and it is these artistic images or symbols that stand for and evoke the rational ideas that reveal our native noumenal realm beyond nature, beyond ‘mere complexities’.

## 3

But what we take to lie ‘beyond the limits of experience’

us). Everything that provokes this feeling in us, including the might of nature which challenges our strength, is then, though improperly, called sublime, and it is only under presupposition of this idea within us, and in relation to it, that we are capable of attaining to the idea of the sublimity of that Being which inspires deep respect in us, not by the mere display of its might in nature, but more by the faculty which is planted in us of estimating that might without fear, and of regarding our estate as exalted above it. (p. 114)

But this appears to be no more than an ungrounded refusal to acknowledge the magnificence of those aspects of nature (what we call the sublime in nature) that awaken us to the nature of our own humanity. There seems no point in the claim that the sublime in nature is not properly so called merely because it discloses a greater sublimity still. Indeed, we do not similarly cancel the estimation of the sublimity to be found in our own minds when we come to acknowledge the greater sublimity of the divine being.

## II

When Kant comes to discuss artistic 'genius' in his *Critique* he identifies it as the 'faculty of presenting *aesthetic ideas*', which he distinguishes from 'ideas of reason', and he justifies his claim that such 'representations of the imagination' may be termed 'ideas' on the grounds that

they at least strain after something lying beyond the confines of experience, and so seek to approach a presentation of rational concepts ... thus giving to these concepts the semblance of an objective reality.

So what is the relationship between these artistic representations or images that essentially express (aesthetic) *ideas*, and the ideas of reason that they are claimed to mediate? The point about 'approaching a presentation of rational concepts' needs to be understood in terms of the difference between these concepts and what Kant calls the concepts of the understanding. Whereas imagination in its empirical employment 'presents' to the understanding the manifold of intuition, so that it may be brought under empirical concepts, and issue in a determinate experience, there is nothing that could count as a 'presentation'

The man that is actually in a state of fear ... because he is conscious of offending with his evil disposition against a might directed by a will at once irresistible and just, is far from being in the frame of mind for admiring divine greatness, for which a temper of calm reflection and quite free judgment are required. Only when he becomes conscious of having a disposition that is upright and acceptable to God, do those operations of might serve to stir within him the idea of the sublimity of this Being, so far as he recognizes the existence in himself of a sublimity of disposition consonant with His will, and is thus raised above the dread of such operations of nature. (p. 114)

Crucially then Kant conceives of a development here, a movement in the experience of the sublime from the disclosure of freedom to a *sublimity of disposition* that is an expression of that freedom. But then he continues:

Therefore nature is here called sublime merely because it raises the imagination to a presentation of those cases in which the mind can make itself sensible of the appropriate sublimity of the sphere of its own being, even above nature (*die eigene Erhabenheit seiner Bestimmung*).

That this is not merely *hubris* is clear from what else Kant says. The sublime in nature awakens the mind not just to the rational concept of transcendental freedom, but also to that of the supersensible substrate of all phenomena. The sublime

carries our concept of nature to a supersensible substrate (underlying both nature and our faculty of thought) which is great beyond every standard of sense (p. 104)

However, we might have reservations about the way Kant expresses himself here. Do we call nature sublime *merely* because it raises us to an appreciation of the sublimity of the noumenal realm of our own freedom? It seems, unfortunately, that for Kant we do:

Sublimity, therefore, does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own minds, in so far as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us (as exerting influence upon

the soul are not only seen in demeanour and conduct, but are also expressed in 'monuments of unaging intellect', our singing school is the study of these, art may help to keep the soul alive and self-aware but must also therefore represent the purgatorial fires of its re-embodiment of the human being. As we shall see, Kant thinks of artistic genius as precisely the power to produce representations of the imagination that awaken us to our own faculty of ideas and its place in the supersensible, noumenal world. However, my earlier remarks about the singular self-consciousness that Kant describes shows that this is not a merely external, utilitarian view of the function of art. It is, rather, the natural expression and striving of that self-consciousness.

Something interesting and unexpected has emerged in just this idea of the felt sublimity of our supersensible freedom. To repeat the point, not only does the experience of the sublime in nature disclose to us our own distinctively human sphere, but its disclosure is as an object of admiration, as something elevated, the apprehension of which makes other things dwindle in significance. Instead of the magnificence of the sublime in nature, we are converted to the magnificence of the sphere of our own freedom.

## 4

However, it is one thing to admire the prospect of a possibility, and another to admire its expressions, its 'monuments', and Kant does go on to refer briefly to something like this in his account of our proper disposition before the sublimity of God. Although we discover a pre-eminence of our minds over the most overwhelming might of nature, it would be folly, he says, to presume to such pre-eminence over against the might of the Creator, and though we may be inclined to think that on the contrary:—

instead of a feeling of the sublimity of our own nature, submission, prostration, and a feeling of utter helplessness seem more to constitute the attitude of mind befitting the manifestation of such an object (p. 113).

- Kant suggests rather that this latter cast of mind is not intrinsically connected with the idea of the sublimity 'of a religion and its object', and that the recognition of divine sublimity does not depend upon losing the sense of the sublimity of our own nature, but on retaining it:

*To the holy city of Byzantium*

And this couplet, in particular,

*Nor is there singing school but studying*

*Monuments of its own magnificence;*

appears close to what may now be seen emerging of a Kantian view of art. I asked a moment ago how the possibilities and demands of our moral nature are to be maintained in view, given that they can become submerged. The Yeatsian answer would seem to be that it is in the singing school in which it studies monuments of its own magnificence. Artistic genius acts like the sublime in the natural world, that is, it stimulates within us our sense of the realm of moral ideas, our sense of what Yeats calls 'soul', though what Yeats goes on to say shows, perhaps, some limitation in Kant's account:—

*O sages standing in God's holy fire*

*As in the gold mosaic of a wall,*

*Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,*

*And be the singing-masters of my soul*

- though Kant himself uses an unexpectedly strong language of feeling when he talks about the sublime: it is 'dead earnest in the affairs of the imagination' and 'the imagination finds itself at the edge of an abyss in which it fears to lose itself' (significantly, Kant uses the image of an abyss to represent the sublime and its power over us).

Nevertheless, Yeats's language is far stronger, and he talks explicitly of a connection between wisdom and purification by fire, describing, perhaps, more than the awakening of 'soul', the course of its struggle with its own mortal flesh and its desires, the process of purification or purging, *An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve*, describing transformations of felt experience. But we are now beginning to approach a view of the role of art. For Yeats the singing-masters are the 'sages in God's holy fire', and the life of the soul requires its *own* song, or expression, not that of the flesh, and in the singing school we study monuments of the soul's magnificence, monuments neglected when we are 'caught in that sensual music' of those dying generations 'at *their* song' (my italics).

'Magnificence' is a word that may come to our aid in the hammering out of what may appear a conceit, the connection between this poet and this philosopher, but the sublime object of aesthetic judgment is itself a kind of magnificence or grandeur, and what we admire or venerate when we are awakened to it we could reasonably call 'the soul's magnificence'. But in that case what precisely *is* the role of art? States of



view? The mind in this sense is not stable, and its moral powers of action ebb and flow. To put it another way, the mind is not to be separated or detached from the moral standards to which we subscribe: we are *subscribed*. What I mean by this is that we do not stand in a relation of cool appraisal of the standards that form us, though sometimes the 'soul' has to be 'animated' by its own dormant principles, and when it is so animated, the ordering of desires falls into place. This is connected to this singular form of self-consciousness that emerges from Kant's account, though it is difficult to categorise it. The judgment that something in nature is 'sublime' is grounded in feelings of awe and admiration, and in such a way that other things dwindle by comparison to insignificance. But if we transfer that judgment and that experience to the notion of our humanity and its place in the greater scheme of things, there is a question whether we can still properly call it 'aesthetic' since it is no longer directed at something in the natural world that we judge sublime. But that issue is a relatively trivial one. More to the point, what is the nature of this kind of self-consciousness in which we awaken to our own free nature with feelings of awe and admiration that are analogous to our feelings to the sublime in nature? The closest I can get to this is something like Hamlet's 'What a piece of work is a man?' or the sudden disclosure of the 'grandeur' of the spirit, and there is no mere narcissism here, but a kind of awe in the face of what we find our nature calls forth from us, a compelled and projected self-formation. But such a projection of our moral and spiritual nature puts us in a state of tension and possible conflict with the internal natural forces of inclination, which must be presumed active and dominant when our ideas are dormant: but again one sees the image of the Stoic Roman senator ...

## 3

This conflict between the flesh and the spirit is well expressed in familiar lines of the Irish poet W.B. Yeats, from the second stanza of *Sailing to Byzantium*:

*An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence;  
And therefore have I sailed the seas and come*

*consciousness*: an *attitude* towards it, of awe or wonder, that Kant wrests from our previous attitude to the sublime in nature: we admire or venerate what is disclosed in a way that transforms our order of priorities, in other words, we find it an object of awe and wonder, find it *sublime*.

So, although we may question whether our experience of the sublime in nature takes the form and direction that Kant says it does, he nevertheless makes here an intriguing claim about the form and direction of our mental life. Not only is our moral nature something to which we need to be recalled, but it is also something whose revelation can astonish us with a power analogous to our experience of the sublime in nature, but it can become an object of such veneration or admiration that other things can seem trifling by comparison, indeed it becomes a *standard of comparison*, one by which our priorities are precisely ordered or re-ordered. This may seem merely pious. But the point is, we do not always simply acknowledge or recall ourselves to the presence of our moral freedom, but sometimes, perhaps rarely, it is recalled or disclosed in the form of a *memorable experience* of awe or wonder, of which the reordering of our priorities is a felt part. However, it is one thing to experience the palpable sense of that reordering and another to live or embody it. Some commentators have queried the notion of ‘respect for law’ in Kant’s moral philosophy, but it may be more intelligible in the light of this account of the force of the sublime upon our mind and sensibility, even if we withhold consent from his account of the Categorical Imperative and the dualism of Reason and Inclination as he conceives them, which is not to say that there is no tension between the forces of the soul and what we might call the forces of the flesh.

The idea of a natural re-ordering of our priorities is familiar enough in the history of philosophy: we find it for instance in Diotima’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium* where she discusses how we change our erotic allegiance from beauty of body to beauty of soul. It is also found among the poets, notably in Rilke’s image of Orpheus, whose singing silences the beasts of the forest into an attitude of attention or listening whereby their normal appetites and passions recede to the periphery, and new possibilities of consciousness emerge, fostered by this image of the work of art.

Kant’s talk of ‘raising the forces of the soul beyond the ordinary measure’ is apt, since this reordering can lose its grip in a loss of perspective in which the possibilities of moral freedom lose their efficacy and hold upon the mind. So how are those possibilities maintained in

should. There is no circle, though, if we distinguish different relations to ideas; they need to be present if dormant if they are to be excited and set the mind in motion.

Although Kant's political metaphor incidentally discloses a political preoccupation that is admirable in itself, its use here must raise mild doubts for us about the place of the sublime in nature in Kant's own imagination, or, indeed, in his (non-reading) experience. It also has the effect of superimposing on our experience of the overwhelming forces of nature an attitude of alienation, resistance and defiance that seems to belong more to the political sphere in which resistance is a genuine possibility, than to our attitude to nature even in its most powerful and threatening aspects. Kant remarks in dark Romantic mood that our power to 'resist' (*widerstehen*) is insignificant in the face of bold, overhanging, threatening rocks, storm clouds piled high in the heavens, thunder and lightning, volcanoes in their destructive force, hurricanes leaving devastation in their wake, and so on. But he insists that under the right conditions

They raise the forces of the soul beyond the ordinary measure, and discover within us a power to resist of quite another kind, one which gives us the courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature. (p. 111)

And because they do so, he says, 'we readily call these objects sublime' (p. 111).

## 2

However, in asserting that the experience of the sublime is an occasion for the disclosure or rediscovery of our moral freedom (from natural inclinations within and natural forces without), Kant makes the further and connected claim that we are able thereby to regard as small and of no significance those things which otherwise we attach most importance to, our worldly goods, our health and our life itself. This is a remark which, like the reference to the forces of the soul, it is easy to disregard, but I want to highlight it as of vital importance for moral psychology when placed in the context of the total picture of the moral life to which it belongs. The implication is that the disclosure or recollection of our moral nature in the experience of the sublime is *a singular form of self-*

discover an inner ascendancy over the forces of nature at just the moment that we might feel most vulnerable to them; and just where we feel our powerlessness before it most, we may discover a power within to disregard as insignificant what it can damage and destroy, in the light of what we realise is capable of being preserved. It can exercise no dominion over our essential humanity, our nature as moral beings. (So this is not a discovery about oneself over against others, but a discovery about oneself precisely in the humanity one shares with others). The political metaphor at the heart of this passage is sufficiently striking, highlighting the great Enlightenment theme of political freedom: one can almost see the Stoic Roman senator standing self-possessed and unafraid before the arbitrary will of the Emperor. This metaphor is in some ways apt enough. To stand there self-possessed and unafraid in the face of the sublime where others are in a state of fear and dread depends upon the condition that one's mind is already furnished with *ideas*. Experience of the sublime is one of the occasions when 'ideas' are awakened, and they are said to 'extend' (*erweitern*) and 'strengthen' (*stärken*) the mind. It is easy to underestimate Kant's references to 'extending' and 'strengthening' the mind (*das Gemüt*) in these contexts. There is a slightly submerged implication that ideas can be quite absent from the mind, and that when they are present they are either dormant or activated by the sublime or by works of art. But if they extend and strengthen the mind one must surely insist that they do so because they are formative of it, formative, that is, of the *sensibility* which seems implied in the German word—*das Gemüt*—that is translated by Meredith as 'mind'. The criteria of identity for a state or condition of the mind would then make essential reference to the *ideas* that inform feeling, and it is such formation that constitutes the mind's 'ascendancy' and 'power to resist'. However, Kant speaks of the necessity for a 'rich stock of ideas' (p. 92) as a *condition* of the experience of the sublime, and at (p. 115) he writes:

The proper mental mood for a feeling of the sublime postulates the mind's receptiveness towards ideas ...

without the development of moral ideas, what we who are prepared through culture call sublime, merely strikes the untrained person as terrifying.

It is tempting to think that Kant is caught here in a vicious circle, that the experience of the sublime awakens us to moral ideas, and that moral ideas are needed already if we are to experience the sublime as we

*whose work I appeal to from time to time, W.B. Yeats. It is rather that I have been both moved and perplexed by Kant's account of aesthetic ideas over a number of years, and though I have written about these issues elsewhere, (McGhee, 2000) further reading shows me the inadequacy of my previous understanding. Over the same number of years, and indeed for much longer, I have also been moved and perplexed by the great poems of Yeats's *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*, and I have sometimes thought that the poet and the philosopher can shed light on the meaning of each other's work.*

**Keywords:** *the sublime, aesthetic, moral ideas, conception, taste*

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## I

There is a moment in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*—it is one of many in which the heavy grip of the architectonic is relaxed—in which he seems to capture the sense of a perennial human experience, one about which, however, we may want to ask whether it is profound or illusory:

the irresistibility of the power of nature forces us to recognise our physical impotence as natural beings, but at the same time discloses our capacity to judge ourselves independent of nature as well as disclosing an ascendancy above nature that grounds a self-preservation quite different from that which may be assailed and endangered by external nature. This saves humanity in our own person from humiliation, even though as human beings we have to submit to that violence. In this way nature is not estimated in our aesthetic judgement as sublime because it excites fear, but because it summons up our power (which is not of nature) to regard as petty what we are otherwise anxious about (worldly goods, health, and life), and hence to regard its power (to which in these matters we are certainly exposed) as exercising over us and our personality no such dominion that we should bow down before it, once the question becomes one of our highest principles and of our asserting or forsaking them. (Kant, 1928, p. 111)<sup>1</sup>

The passage itself is governed by the trope of reversal. Thus, we may

## (Sailing to) Byzantium: the Kantian Sublime

Michael McGhee\*

### *Abstract*

*Aestheticians and moral philosophers alike are inclined to the view that there is no particularly beneficial effect on moral life of a developed aesthetic sensibility. The usual supporting witness is the pitiless Nazi SS officer with a refined taste for Mozart and torture. But though his testimony can hardly be gainsaid, there is an unnoticed and unwarranted narrowing of the scope of aesthetic sensibility implicit in the very production of such a witness. In a word, aesthetic sensibility is reduced to a matter of what Kant called taste, which, for him, was a matter of judgments of the beautiful, whether in art or nature. What is neglected is the parallel Kantian notion of the sublime. Kant charges those who remain unaffected by the sublime not with a want of taste but a want of feeling, and he makes it clear that if we are to be moved by the sublime we must already be furnished with moral ideas. In that case, our question should not be whether there is a beneficial effect on moral life of a developed aesthetic sensibility, but whether moral life can have an affect on aesthetic sensibility. But before we can address such questions we need to examine Kant's conception of sublimity, which appears to connect it, not just to the moral life and poetry but also to religion, in such a way that we may come to the conclusion that the relationship between moral life and aesthetic sensibility is reciprocal, in the sense that whereas we may need to be furnished with moral ideas to be moved by the sublime, this and poetry (or the arts more generally), turn out to be a means of extending our conception of what constitutes moral life.*

*I make no attempt in what follows to offer a systematic account of what Kant writes about sublimity, ideas and art in the third Critique, and nor do I attempt to show any general cultural influence on the poet*

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\* Professor of Philosophy University of Liverpool, UK.