

# The Sublime

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.....the man who says “This is sublime cannot mean I have sublime feelings.” Even if it were granted that such qualities as sublimity were simply and solely projected into things from our own emotions, yet the emotions which prompt the projection are the correlatives, and therefore almost the opposites, of the qualities projected. The feelings which make a man call an object sublime are not sublime feelings but feelings of veneration. (18-19, *The Abolition of Man*)

What is sublime? Can feelings be sublime? Can nature be sublime? Immanuel Kant says that “the sublime is what pleases immediately through its opposition to the interest of sense.” The author of *On the Sublime* defines sublimity as “excellence in language,” the power to provoke “ecstasy,” and the “expression of a great spirit.” Something must affect one or more of the senses to be called sublime. Through the sublimity of feelings and of nature, we open the door to a greater sense. These senses are found deep in the soul. Through the influence of the sublime on these senses, people are somehow able to find the greatest force in the world -- the Architect of the Universe.

Some would say that the sublime is primarily an internal rather than an external concept. That raises a question such as “which is greater, Bach or his music?” The music obviously lasts longer than the man, and inspires more people than the man. On the other hand, some would say that the man is greater, because he wrote the inspiring music. Most of these people would acknowledge that someone greater is behind the masterpiece. If you heard a piece by Bach and did not know it was by him, you would instinctively ask “who wrote that?” The same goes

for poetry. If you read a piece of great poetry, you would ask the same question. Many similar examples can be found throughout history, such as the Sistine Chapel. The architecture alone is breathtaking. Inside, you see the work of the Renaissance painter, Michelangelo, as well as many other productions by Florentine Renaissance masters.

Many writers, whether they be philosophers or authors, write about the sublime. Two of the most inspiring authors of the Romantic period chose the sublime to be representative of their view of Aristotle's the "Good." In a descriptive passage, Immanuel Kant wrote about the sublime:

Prominent, overhanging, menacing cliffs, towering storm clouds from which come lightening flashes and thunderclaps as they roll by, volcanoes in their destructive violence, hurricanes leaving devastation in their trail, the boundless, raging ocean, a lofty waterfall on some might river, all render our capacity to resist significantly small in comparison to their power.

Or, equally moving, the effect of the sublime captured in Percy Shelley's *Mont Blanc*:

Thine earthly rainbows stretch'd across the sweep  
Of the aethereal waterfall, whose veil  
Robes some unsculptur'd image; the strange sleep  
Which when the voices of the desert fail  
Wraps all in its own deep eternity;  
Thy caverns echoing to the Arve's commotion,  
A loud, lone sound no other sound can tame;  
Thou art pervaded with that ceaseless motion,

Thou art the path of that unresting sound--  
Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee  
I seem as in a trance sublime and strange  
To muse on my own separate fantasy,  
My own, my human mind, which passively  
Now renders and receives fast influencings,  
Holding an unremitting interchange  
With the clear universe of things around;

*Mont Blanc* overflows with sublime concepts even beyond these. It speaks of the beauty around the writer and how inspiring it is for a poet or human being to be in the presence of such glory. But that was then and this is now and even in another part of the world. In our day and place the sublime seems too archaic a concept. The sublime seems soft and impressionistic. It conveys a sensation that is now of little importance except in understanding some historical varieties of romanticism. In comparison with the ideas of form and evolutionary development that now dominate biology and science, the sublime seems almost the opposite. The sublime is, overall, seen as something that goes above anything we can comprehend, but people do see the sublime in many different ways. A writer might see it as meaning one thing and a mathematician might see it as meaning another. One way of seeing it is as something baffling with feelings of limitation, parallel to awe. Another way of looking at it is a stimulation of our being and the expression of the mind in respects to an object.

Yet during the Romantic era, the sublime was the most important concept to understand. It was a major cultural preoccupation and was discussed by philosophers in great

analytic detail. It was considered an essential part of understanding the nature of the mind itself. In the sublime, we are granted an unusual glimpse of the relationship between disorder and order, and its effect on the mind attempting to create one out of the other. It may be that the sublime provides an important model of how we come to understand the world. If we take a look at how the sublime is traditionally described, it is not formlessness or emotion that is invoked, but the opposite.

The sublime was first noted by Aristotle and then recorded into his tragedies, but the earliest mentioned case of the sublime was in a treatise by Cassius Longinus, *On the Sublime*. He describes it as "boldness and grandeur of thought." Edmund Burke, an eighteenth century modern philosopher, addresses the sublime in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756). Burke said that the sublime is caused by a "mode of terror or pain." This is contrasted with, instead of being part of, the beautiful. When addressing the sublime "the mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it." The sublime creates an overwhelming "astonishment."

In the 1790s, Johann Sulzer, a mathematician and philosopher, wrote that the sublime "works on us with hammer-blows; it seizes us and irresistibly overwhelms us." It is the "highest thing that there is in art." Henry Home also addresses it in his *Elements of Criticism*. He sought a psychological explanation on the sublime. In 1694, the *Dictionnaire de l'Academie francaise* defined sublime as "Exalted, lofty. The term is only used in connection with spiritual matters that concern the intellect: thus, a man of sublime virtue, a sublime genius, a sublime spirit, a sublime thought, a sublime style, the sublime sciences, the most sublime understanding." This

is a definition of the sublime in references to spiritual awakening, but seventy years later the perspective on the sublime had changed slightly, becoming more self-conscious. Now it refers not only to the quality of mind or vision, but also to the experience of that quality and the self-consciousness that is felt in experiencing the sublime.

Like his colleagues, Kant disassociated the concept of sublimity from that of beauty. He made it apply only to the mind, instead of to the object, also giving it a moral effect in opposing the senses. Kant argued that when we determine that an object is beautiful, any consideration of "interest" is irrelevant. To judge beauty, you must be detached from it. The beauty of the object has nothing to do with its usefulness or purchase value. You may want to own the item, but this is not the judgment of beauty, for the judgment is unattainable by your own means if you are only looking at purchase or sentimental value. Whether we gaze at the ceiling of the chapel or listen to a Bach piano concerto, we make an aesthetic judgment and we have no other interests. Pure aesthetic judgment, for Kant, is as detached and as devoted to abstraction as is mathematical thinking. Kant also suggests that when we judge something to be beautiful, we are making another kind of assertion about it. We treat it as if it were made for our contemplation. What is important is that at the very moment such beauty becomes apparent to us, the world appears as if it were constructed according to some purpose, or better. The world appears as if it were well suited to human perception and understanding. Kant referred to this as regarding nature "after the analogy of art."

This means that when we approach a beautiful object we do not treat it as if it were accidentally constructed. As followers of Darwin remind us, the existence of amazing design does not mean the object was purposely designed as a sophisticated organism. It can seem

designed without being so, but in comprehending the object's working, and appreciating its beauty, we act just as if it were designed. We treat an object as if nothing about it was accidental, as if every element had a function serving the whole, as if even the whole had a function, part of which is to create our understanding of the object's beauty.

We are surrounded by awe-inspiring design and purpose, even the architecture we raise to house our art, our beliefs, and ourselves. The Sistine Chapel is proof of that. Giovanni dei Dolci created this rectangular brick building, with six arched windows and a barrel-vaulted ceiling. Its size alone is amazing. The inside is even more spectacular. The north wall has six frescoes depicting the life of Christ, painted by Perugino, Pinturicchio, Botticelli, Ghirlandajo, and Rosselli. On the south wall these same artists, including Luca Signorelli and Bartolomeo della Gatta, created six more frescoes depicting events from the life of Moses. Popes and ceremonial frescoes adorn the Chapel in the vacant areas between and above the windows. On the ceiling and the west wall, behind the altar, is where Michelangelo made his great mark. They depict the incidents and personages from the Old Testament. On the west wall is the depiction of "The Last Judgment." The Sistine Chapel has been an inspiration to artists and religious sects since the Renaissance. As humans, we think, "something that gigantic and beautiful has to be built by someone amazing." So why can something as amazing as nature not be made by someone? If nature, alone, cannot inspire someone, then look to Sony IMAX. This is nature up close and personal, as well as larger than life. When you sit in those tiny seats and look up at the people climbing Mount Everest or swimming with the dolphins, you have this overwhelming feeling of amazement and inspiration. You feel as if you are part of it. This is

nature brought to you through the eyes of a camera. Imagine if you were really there. How would you feel?

I had a chance to experience the grandeur of nature over the millennial New Year. A group of students and myself went to Jamaica to study the marine life and its habitat. We would rise early in the morning and would stay up until the moon was over our heads. What I saw in-between should be enough to make any man a poet. The sun rising and setting, the waterfalls, the lush gardens and tropical birds, the amazing variety of fish and marine life was worth more than the money paid to get there. I was in sublime country. The only thing missing was the native's acknowledgment of a creator. Most of the Jamaicans appreciated what was around them, but only if it made them money. They were not as much concerned with preserving as with how much income they could bring home. Beauty seemed a second-rate concept and was only used in connection with luring tourists to their land.

A beautiful object, whether in nature or in art, also seems to have a purposiveness, a sense that it was made specifically for our contemplation. Beauty organizes the conflicts of the rational mind. It reveals, enlightens, affirms, charms, and delights. What we sense at such moments is the analogy of part and whole. We are feeling something not rudimentary, but something precise and seemingly beyond contradiction. It is also why we feel something similar when coming upon the beautiful in art and the beautiful in nature. "Aesthetic pleasure is essentially one and the same," Schopenhauer wrote, "no matter whether it is evoked by a work of art or immediately produced by the contemplation of nature and life." Beauty is experienced as a form of knowledge because it is through the quintessential rational act that we come to know the beautiful.

Kant argues that while the beautiful is related to the form of an object, the sublime may even exist in a formless object. The beautiful object seems purposive and final. The sublime object seems to resist judgment. Beauty solicits understanding while the sublime defies it. Kant suggests that it seems to have a capacity to "transcend all empirical standards merely by thinking of it." The sublime is linked to limitlessness and the infinite, yet it also has its effect because that limitlessness is somehow grasped and absorbed at once. We look at a landscape and embrace it from where we are, but what is embraced seems limitless. Beauty tricks us into thinking the object was adapted just for our logical minds, but the sublime perpetrates what Kant called an "outrage on the imagination." The effect of the sublime is not in the world of objects, but in subjective experience. The sublime is part of inner, not outer life. Kant identified a type of the sublime as the "mathematically sublime" because it established its sublimity on the basis of immensity, such as a mountain or a dinosaur.

When we contemplate such concepts, we seem to find a perfect example of what Kant described as the effect of the sublime. The mind is humbled by finding its imagination unequal to its ideas. It cannot grasp what it can think. On the other hand, the mind feels that itself is superior because of the power of such ideas. If we were to use our aesthetic judgment, we would interpret a landscape in respects to its interrelationships. The way in which man-made shapes correspond with natural forms, such as the coral reefs that form around a sunken vessel. We would attempt to establish analogies and proportions, creating a structure for the vision as we do in the creating a mathematical theory or comprehending a chess game. We would partially control and contain the seascape and see how the marine animals affect the remnants of the ship, or how the sunlight affects the growth of marine plant life. The scene would seem like

a grand purposive construction arrayed before us for the sake of our own reflective analysis, awaiting our interpretation.

This mixing of nature and man-made leads the mind in different directions, so there is no easy way to settle into a well-ordered theory or stable interpretation. Bach plays the “Toccatina and Fugue” with subtlety and grace. He leads the ear through a series of meandering statements in response to the opening motives that march by with such mellifluous force that the world around the listener folds in upon itself, forming a womb-like envelope of sound. Contained within is a virtual sea of information within which we must swim the deepest depths. The quantity of stimulation creates a “cognitive exhaustion” that is associated with the sublime. In music the sublime arises, in truth, from structure not size. A piece might defy our imagination to give it coherence even as we seem to grasp it as a whole. Even the brief “Little Suite Chorale” can seem a throwback, a stripping away of reason, yet it is also curiously lifting because of the way it inspires a very high estimate of our own sensibility as we come to grasp it as if carried along by its currents. We might even describe the Chorale as an attempt to create a psychological sublime, in which the music seems to weave a mysterious inner landscape. The effect is similar to what we might find on gazing out at a sublime landscape from our sublime perch: an inability to grasp what we can so easily understand.

We experience the sublime partly because we do understand it. We know precisely what is happening in Bach’s “Toccatina and Fugue” and in Shelley’s poetry. We can identify all the analogies being made and all the proportions being established. But it cannot all be absorbed simultaneously. The form becomes, in Kant’s words, an “outrage on our imagination.”

Kant insists on the difference between the sublime and the beautiful, but there are many points of connection. It seems as if the deeper our understanding is of an object, the more we are able to encompass it in our imagination. We can make more sense of its threat and outrage, even make those assaults on our imagination seem part of our understandings. If we gaze out at that landscape, separated from it by the threshold, we are always partly detached from it, always analyzing as we are overwhelmed. We are always attempting to interpret and discern or create its beauty. And it may be that which puts obstacles up for us one day and is grasped the next. This is not a Kantian view, but it seems as if our imagination can be educated by our understanding. The overwhelming scene, with its wide expanses and sharp contrasts, will be seen as an expression of order, a representation of something else and perhaps something still more sublime. What seems beyond our imagining is incorporated into it.

Yet there is another twist in our relationship with the sublime. As the sublime is absorbed into our imagination and our understanding, a tectonic shift of sorts occurs. No sooner have we made sense of the seascape than we notice something more profoundly disordered about it, something so complex it seems to defy us. No sooner has our understanding grown, than our imagination is again thrown into disarray in trying to grasp what we have come to know. No sooner is one task done than we become aware of the immensity of the world beyond the threshold. There always seems to be something lying outside the reach of the idea, outside the ability of our minds and ears to comprehend. Beauty seems to change under pressure from the sublime.

But perhaps our seeking to master the sublime and to find its beauty and inner laws while also revealing its power is what science has always been, which might be all the greater for

being understood. This may be a goal of art as well, a quest for what seems beyond the abilities of art ever to grasp. We are continuously engaged in a task of training our imaginations to be equal to the achievements of our understanding.

The sublime inspires an infinite desire for completion that will always be beyond satisfaction until we get to heaven. This spirit of sublimity has driven Western art and science for centuries and it is what has given them a religious cast. The sublime has also given them a rationalist cast, for it is the sublime that spurs us to understanding through its vast inspiration, not the static contemplation of the beautiful.

All that is around us, in art, literature, and landscaping, as well as science and mathematics, is so awe inspiring, how can we not credit a higher power with its creation. It causes us, as humans, to search for an understanding of the greater meaning we experience. Many individuals, such as the Romantic poet Blake, found God through the sublime. In the film American Beauty (1999), directed by Sam Mendes, the neighbor boy, Ricky Fitts, films objects that he thinks are beautiful, such as a frozen homeless woman:

RICKY FITTS. Have you ever known anybody who died?

JANE BURNHAM. No. Have you?

RICKY FITTS. No, but I did see this homeless women who froze to death once, just laying on the sidewalk, she looked really sad. I got that

homeless women on video tape

JANE BURNHAM. Why would you film that?

RICKY FITTS. Because it was amazing.

JANE BURNHAM. What's amazing about it?

RICKY FITTS. When you see something like that, it's like God is looking right at you, just for a second. And if you're careful, you can look right back.

JANE BURNHAM. And what do you see?

RICKY FITTS. Beauty.

Or a bag playing in the wind:

RICKY FITTS. It's one of those days when it's a minute away from snowing and there's this electricity in the air. You can almost hear it. Right?

And this bag was just dancing with me like a little kid begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes. That's the day realized there was this entire life behind things and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know that there was no reason to be afraid. Ever. Video is a poor excuse, I know, but it helps me remember. I need to remember. Sometimes there is so much beauty in the world, I feel like I can't take it and my heart is going to cave in.

Ricky found the sublime just by drinking in all that was around him, plain or ghastly as it might have seemed on the surface. Like him, we can find that greater person when we realize all things in this world are created, thus having a creator. Therein lies the divine truth, and it is in that Promised Land we must strive to gain entry in the end.

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