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The Problem and Promise of the Sublime: Lessons from Kant and Schopenhauer

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5.1 Introduction

The beautiful, the picturesque, and the sublime emerged as the three central, well-delineated categories of aesthetic experience in the eighteenth century. While the beautiful was seen as a wholly pleasurable experience of typically delicate, harmonious, balanced, smooth and polished objects, the sublime was understood largely as its polar opposite, as a mixed painful-pleasurable experience of typically vast, formless, threatening, or awe-inspiring natural environments or phenomena. Although certain works of architecture were standardly numbered among sublime objects (e.g., St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome and the Egyptian pyramids) and the distinctive pleasure of tragedy was also characterized as sublime by Burke and Schopenhauer, the paradigmatic cases of sublime experience at this time were with natural environments and phenomena such as towering mountain ranges, the open ocean, the starry heavens, storms at sea, roaring cascades, smoldering volcanoes, and frozen tundra.

Of these three aesthetic categories, only the sublime threatens to seem paradoxical. While the ‘idea of beauty’ for Burke, was ‘founded on pleasure’, that of the sublime was ‘founded on pain’; he thus describes sublime pleasure in oxymoronic terms as a ‘delightful horror’ and a ‘sort of tranquility tinged with terror’. More mildly, Addison characterizes sublime response as ‘a pleasing astonishment’, and Kant describes it as a ‘negative’ rather than a ‘positive pleasure’, in which ‘the mind is not merely attracted by the object, but is also always reciprocally repelled by it’. Along the lines of the well-known problem of tragedy, it became a philosophical problem in the eighteenth century to explain why the sublime should be experienced overall with positive affect and valued so highly given that its characteristic phenomenology was seen to crucially
involve an element of pain. Accordingly, philosophers took up the following questions: Why do people feel pleasure with respect to objects that do not conform to the conditions of beauty (e.g., harmony, proportion, delicacy) and are instead experienced as vast, overwhelming, or terrifying? (Burke); whence the pleasure with objects or phenomena recognized as contrapurposeful for our cognitive faculties, or which make us feel powerless or existentially insignificant? (Kant and Schopenhauer). Deepening the sense of paradoxicality is the view that the experience of the sublime is actually more profound and satisfying than that of the beautiful, Burke calling it the ‘strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling’, 7 though, for reasons adduced above, the sublime seems less promising for aesthetic pleasure.

The first aim of this chapter is historical. I shall focus on an important juncture in the history of aesthetics, from the empiricist Burke to the transcendental-idealists, Kant and Schopenhauer, and their formulation and handling of the problem of the sublime. From this juncture, I reconstruct two main types of theoretical explanation that emerged, the physiological and the transcendental, and aim to show that in the transition from the physiological to the transcendental explanations one sees the sublime – precisely because it involves negative emotions – take on greater metaphysical and ethical importance, an importance that comes to overshadow that of the beautiful. This tracks a similar movement in the arts away from measured, harmonious Classicism and toward the unruly, overwhelming aesthetic of Romanticism.

The second aim of this chapter is contemporary-philosophical. Pace New Yorker art critic Peter Schjeldahl’s characterization of the concept of the sublime as ‘a hopelessly jumbled philosophical notion that has had more than two centuries to start meaning something cogent and hasn’t succeeded yet’, 8 I offer an account of the aesthetic category understood along two lines – as a ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ sublime response – that is both coherent and relevant for contemporary aesthetics and art criticism. After arguing briefly for this claim with respect to environmental aesthetics, I will focus on defending a framework for sublime responses to art.

5.2 The surge of the sublime

Eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophical treatments of the sublime tried to account for the seemingly paradoxical phenomenology by focusing especially on the source of the negative and positive emotions within it. Two main types of explanation emerged: the physiological and the transcendental. The former is exemplified by Burke,