



Sublimation

[The feeling of the mathematical sublime] represents our imagination in all its boundlessness, and with it nature, as sinking into insignificance before the ideas of reason...Therefore, the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own [supersensible] vocation, which we attribute to an object of nature by a certain subreption (substitution of a respect for the object in place of one for the idea of humanity in our own self – the subject)...

Immanuel Kant

The logic at work in the experience of the [Kantian] dynamical sublime is...as follows: true, I may be powerless in face of the raging forces of nature, a tiny particle of dust thrown around by wind and sea, yet all this fury of nature pales in comparison with the absolute pressure exerted on me by the superego, which humiliates me and compels me to act contrary to my fundamental interests!

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Introduction

The term sublimation is, no doubt, a complicated term in current, critical and psychoanalytic thought. As James Twitchell gleefully contends in *Romantic Horizons* (1983), sublimation describes a “dynamic psychological process”, but “no one seems to know exactly what that is – least of all the people who use it most” (Twitchell 1983: 4). Sigmund Freud, of course, used the term quite a lot yet I would not like to say that he did not know what he was talking about. He talked, in this respect, about a psychological process of exchange or displacement that, Twitchell suggests, somewhat resembles the process of sublimation as it has been described in scientific terms since the fifteenth century: “a complete transformation of matter into purer forms” (ibid.: 1). Thus, Freud postulates his well-known definition of sublimation as a diversion of the aim of a ‘basic’, sexual drive to a ‘higher’ (de-sexualised and acceptable) one, which is nevertheless psychically connected to the original aim. Or rather, it is a channelling of such a drive to an alternative, socially and morally acceptable goal: “the ‘brute’ object alleged to satisfy some basic drive [is transformed] [in]to an ‘elevated’, ‘cultivated’ form of satisfaction”, as for instance the philosopher’s pleasure in thinking or the artist’s satisfaction in artistic creation (Žižek

[1991] 1997: 83). All this makes sublimation into a process that not merely revolves around transformation but also around forgetting: in order to transform a 'basic' drive along socially and morally acceptable lines, it will have to be effectively forgotten for its object to become a new object, and the satisfaction taken in this object to be a new satisfaction, which at best faintly and indirectly recalls any former 'brutality'. Elevation requires a will to oblivion, whether it be in the form of repression, denial, or rejection.

To be sure, I agree with Žižek, there is a certain banality to this interpretation of sublimation – or at least, it easily gives rise to banal interpretations: artistic creations are 'really' veiled (or unveiled) sexual fantasies, music-making is 'really' sublimated masturbation, or a "good and efficient member of a fire-brigade" is 'really' sublimating an "urethral erotism" (ibid.: 83; Brown 1961: 30). Yet all things considered, it is this very transformation to purity, including the urgency of forgetting, that aptly epitomizes the subject at hand here: Immanuel Kant's allegedly revolutionary rewriting of sublime experience in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of Judgement*) (1790). This is not to simply say that Kant's analysis of the sublime easily lends itself to psychoanalytic interpretations – if one wishes to call any flat interpretation of Kantian sublime experience as, say, a *petite mort*, or a sublimated sadomasochistic drive, psychoanalytic. Rather, it is to say that the particular structure of Kantian sublime experience parallels the structure of the process of sublimation in so far as a 'negative' feeling of frustration or terror (pain) is removed and transformed into a 'positive' feeling of delight or elevation (pleasure). What happens in the Kantian sublime, I will explain, is that an initial, apparently unacceptable awareness of self-limitation (manifested as frustration or terror) is resolved – removed and sublimated – into a delightful, psychologically more welcome, realization of one's own supersensible power and limitlessness. In the end, the Kantian sublime experience is thus never truly disturbing but rather reassuring: any feeling of helplessness, frustration, or fear, any self-undermining sensation, in all its negativity, promises (if not already implies) a positive 'result' of self-affirmation and self-elevation exorcising that very frustration or fear.

'No Object Without a Subject'

Kant has been hailed traditionally as the philosopher who has taken the final step in subjectivizing the sublime in the eighteenth century. What, according to him, occasions the sublime feeling; a paradoxical sensation of pain and pleasure, terror and relief, frustration and delight, is ultimately not something from without but something from within that is mistaken for something from without. Before closely considering this Kantian sublime feeling, and how it has been interpreted, valued, and over-valued in the history of aesthetics, it is necessary to first consider some crucial tenets in Kantian philosophy. I will restrict myself here to the status of the subject and its relation to the sensible world, and how the various sensory and cognitive faculties of this subject operate in such a way as to enable cognition and experience of the phenomenal world: the world of appearances.

To start with, Kantian philosophy presents a subject that not so much depends on the world ('sensible reality') as that world depends on the subject – or, to paraphrase Kant's well-known preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), your cognition does not conform to objects; these objects conform to your cognition. This would have been Kant's very own, philosophical version of the revolutionary turn of Copernicus who, when "he found that he could make no progress by assuming that all the heavenly bodies revolved round the spectator,...reversed the process, and tried the experiment of assuming that the spectator revolved, while the stars remained at rest" (Kant [1787] 1991: 6-7). This active stance towards the world of sense, whereby this world gives to the subject what, so to speak, this subject gives to the world, is not merely restricted to objective (scientific) cognition but extends to one's very basic hold on and one's experience (i.e. here: the product of one's thoughts and perceptions) of this world.

What this centrally implies is that I can never even see or 'sight' any object in the world 'as it is in itself' (a reality *an sich*) but only as it appears to me: that object, to recall the above, gives to me what I give (if not already have given) to it. It can in fact only be an object in so far as I sense and think it as an object. Or, as Arthur Schopenhauer succinctly states in his critique of Kantian philosophy, "*no object without a subject*", just as one tends to say today that there is no represented without representation, no 'reality' which is not already inscribed or pre-processed by textual, linguistic, cultural schemes and networks: one's encounters with the world are always mediated and pre-cast, even on the most 'basic', bodily, apparently non-intellectually informed of levels (Schopenhauer [1819] 1986: I, 586, my translation). Without any such pre-structuring I would be lost; there would be unending difference, complete chaos. I would not be able to connect, relate, recollect, recognize, let alone cognise. I would be able to see, hear, taste, feel, smell, but I would not be able to contain, relate, and make sense of what I see, hear, taste, feel, or smell – I would, indeed, instantly forget it once it would be out of sight, and bump into yet another un-(in)-formed

matter, caught in a chaotic flux without any rhythm, without any regulative sense of time or place.

Very briefly put, Kant explains this pre-structuring in terms of forms, schemas and rules issuing from the subject's internal, mental make-up, which ground and condition the possibility of sense perception, experience, and cognition. He calls these forms and rules 'pure' and *a priori* because they are devoid of the sensible as they logically precede, and presuppose, one's interactions with and configurations of the world. Still, as fundamental as these internal forms, schemas, and rules may be, they nevertheless feed on the 'basic stuff' or matter provided by the senses: all experience and cognition starts with, although it can *never be grounded in*, the senses. Typical of Kant's meandering between empiricism and rationalism, there is a two-way traffic here, whereby things coming 'in' from without are at the same time determined from within. The latter thus in the end accounts for the former, even though we may not be immediately aware of that – a statement which will also be of central significance for Kant's analytic of the sublime.

What is the precise make-up of this 'within'? Or rather, if it is through my senses that the 'without' passes, whereto do they pass it on? First, one step removed from the senses, is the power of *imagination* or *Einbildungskraft*. It can do more than the senses in that it can retain, recall, and associate what is in fact no longer vivid to the senses. If to intuit (*anschauen*) means to visualize or to look at, and if the senses visualize in the presence of an object of sense, then imagination can visualize in the absence of an object of sense. It is a seeing (again) with the mind's eye. Nevertheless, imagination is tied to the senses to such an extent that together with them it makes up *sensibility*. In its turn, imagination is what critics like to refer to as the handmaiden or lieutenant of the yet higher faculty of *understanding* (*Verstand*). While imagination is still basically concerned with figures and forms, understanding provides concepts and attends to the machinery of thinking. Imagination is its 'lieutenant' in so far as it mediates between the concepts of understanding and the intuitions of sense. This mediation makes possible a correct application of the abstract concepts of understanding which in themselves have nothing to do with the sensible.

Imagination and Reason

On the basis of this triple distinction of faculties (intuition or *Anschauung*, imagination, and understanding) Kant presents the idea of a triple synthesis in the Transcendental Deduction of the first edition of the *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Pure Reason*) (1781). As the term synthesis indicates, this is a combining of separate, diverse 'raw materials' into a single entity, and for Kant it is the source of all cognition: a triple process of co-ordination (senses), association (imagination), and ultimate unification (understanding). It moves from an 'I see and contain' in (strictly sensuous) apprehension, via an 'I reproduce and relate' by means of the power of imagination, to a final 'I recognize and

identify' by means of the faculty of understanding. Roughly said, the last stage of this triple synthesis, the stage of conceptual identification, coincides with the Kantian moment of cognition. For a detailed account of this triple synthesis, I refer to Appendix A. For now, I will restrict myself to a brief description of the functions and operations of the two main 'players' of the Kantian sublime: imagination and reason.

Together with the senses, I have said, imagination makes up sensibility: it can recall, retain, and relate many different things contained in intuition even when these things are no longer present to the senses. Quite literally said, what imagination can do is to make coherent images in the mind (*ein-bilden*) out of the diversity of impressions – the 'raw stuff' – passed on by the senses. It can, moreover, combine or relate these images to others and retain them over time. This is, however, not the whole story of imagination – at least not in the first edition of Kant's first *Critique*. Recalling Kant's peculiar two-way traffic whereby anything passed on from without is at the same time already-formed from within, imagination also has a *pre-figurative* aspect. In this latter aspect, imagination makes its own doing, its own image-making, possible in the direct engagement with the senses. In official Kantian terminology, this pre-figurative aspect of imagination is called *transcendental*, while the reproductive and re-collective aspect of imagination is called *empirical*. Kant, otherwise notoriously obscure, is very clear on this issue: if the empirical capacity of imagination (i.e. that capacity of imagination directly engaged in the processing of sense data) yields images, the transcendental capacity of imagination (i.e. that 'pre-sensuous' capacity of mind conditioning the possibility of empirical imagination's operations), gives the rules for the making of images. As such, the latter logically precedes the former.

As I have written above, this power of imagination normally functions as the lieutenant or handmaiden of the understanding. In the Kantian sublime, however, something extraordinary will happen to imagination: it is suddenly exposed to the claims of a mysterious mental faculty that is more free, demanding, and also more blindly ambitious than understanding. Kant calls this the faculty of reason [*Vernunft*]. It is a special rational faculty, situated one level above the understanding, and in ordinary circumstances it has no business with imagination. It has, so to speak, no right to mess directly with the sensible. Striving for absolute totality – that is, a totality without condition, relation, or limitation – reason is for Kant a faculty of transcendental *ideas* that have no object in experience, or by means of which no objects can be determined and cognised.¹ No "congruent object of sense" can ever

¹The term 'experience' here strictly refers to the net-result of the triple synthesis: my experience of the world is only possible after this three-stepped process has been completed. For more details see Appendix A.

be given for these ideas, as no objects of sense can ever meet their absolute 'requirements' (Kant [1781] 1990: B384, 359, my translation).²

Thus, reason entertains such ideas as the soul, God, the world as a whole, infinity, eternity, "without conditions of time", omnipresence "without conditions of space", or omnipotence (ibid.: B670, 604). As Kant maintains, I have never 'sensed' these ideas, so that they can neither be visualized nor imagined – which they can, in any case, not, since they are unconditioned by the pure forms of time and space. And the world of appearances, the world that can be perceived with the senses, processed by the imagination, and cognised by the understanding, is a world, precisely, that extends before me *within* the conditions of time and space.³ "Thus", Kant states, "one could say: the absolute whole of appearances *is just an idea*, because, as we cannot ever design an image of [this] idea, so it remains a problem without any [possible] answer" (ibid.: A328, 360). While concepts of understanding are forms to which a content – the raw 'stuff' of intuition processed by imagination – can be made to answer, ideas of reason are empty.

Since ideas of reason are therefore not constitutive of cognition, they can only be used *regulatively*. That is to say, these ideas can only posit something *hypothetically*, instead of apodictically, i.e. a proposition that is not incontestable, not certain, because not yet demonstrated, if not indemonstrable. Yet the importance of these regulative ideas is not to be underestimated: only they can motivate one in a possibly unending pursuit of knowledge. Very basically and simply put, a regulative idea is a guess, possibly an inspiring guess, standing in need of verification and calling for a laborious search or exploration. It thus motivates, challenges, propels, thrusts, and directs the understanding to push ever further, ever forward, toward an imaginary point of focus where its concepts are extended beyond all possible experience to a perfect, systematic unity.⁴

If, therefore, reason is a faculty free from conditions and determinations, but due to that very freedom is to be constrained from trespassing into the sphere of possible experience in any other than a

²A refers to the first or A edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as published in 1781. B refers to the second or B edition of the first *Critique* as issued in 1787.

³These conditions of time and space are discussed and explained in Appendix A.

⁴One could also say: even though reason cannot posit things apodictically it can posit things as *if* they were certain, demonstrated, or acknowledged, although one should be duly aware of the 'as-if' status of such mere postulations. Ideas of reason can thus form a starting point for theological (the idea of God), cosmological (the idea of the world as a whole), and psychological (the idea of the soul) investigations. While these ideas are not "shaped from nature" one will inquire [*befragen*] "about these ideas" in nature and consider one's cognition wanting as long as the latter is not adequate to the former (Kant 1990: B674, 607). Thus, as Deleuze puts it, striving for totality and absolute unity, reason – the "faculty which says: 'Everything happens as if...' " – "does not say that the totality and the unity of conditions are given in the object, but only that objects allow us to tend towards [a] systematic unity as the highest degree of our [cognition]" (Deleuze 1995: 20).

regulative way, there is one exception to this rule. For as Kant argues in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), in so far as reason pertains to the practical or ethical, it does legitimately apply after all to possible experience. Here, practical (as opposed to speculative) reason determines my actions, founds my good will, and grounds my moral obligation, its object being the good. In some ways comparable to the Kantian dictum that intuition, cognition, and experience can never be grounded in the senses, so moral actions cannot, for Kant, *but* be motivated by a law that is radically independent from the interests, and inclinations, of sense. Yet while experience is conditioned, moral conduct is for Kant dictated by a law that is absolute: a law of reason. For according to Kant true moral conduct is a verily selfless, disinterested conduct; a conduct not in any way motivated by personal gain, interest, want, or satisfaction, but inspired by an *unconditional and universal* moral obligation or *categorical imperative*.⁵ Stating the necessity and universality of a law of reason, this categorical imperative shows that the moral conduct of a Kantian subject is not determined by external causes, but that, as a rational subject, it gives itself its own law: that its (good) will is a *law to itself*. That, in other words, this subject is *autonomously*, instead of heteronomously determined, and it is ultimately this autonomy that creates the condition of possibility of the categorical imperative:

If I, a moral subject, abide by the categorical imperative, I also abide by what is most unique in me and constitutes my highest vocation, namely to be a rational being. As such, I am a free and autonomous being, because in adhering to the categorical imperative I am guided by rational grounds, that is, not by something without or above me, but by what I am myself. I am not guided by [personal] motives but by [formal] rationales. (Leijen 1992 in: Verhaeghe 1994: 95, my translation)

An experience of my own morality, being at once an experience of my own rationality, will thus also be an experience of my own autonomy. This experience of one's own autonomy is of crucial importance to Kantian sublime experience. As I will show below, Kant's idea of the sublime cannot be separated from his idea of a moral law within the transcendental subject – if only because the latter can only experience the sublime on account of that law which it writes for itself by the grace of its faculty of reason. This power of reason will be the hero of the Kantian sublime, and pretty much replace the original object of this erstwhile religious experience: the Godhead. As a once external and

⁵This imperative states what *ought* to be the case, and it is categorical because it is not directed at achieving or attaining a personal end of, say, happiness, perfection, or pleasure but states the universality and hence, for Kant, necessity of the (moral) law: act in such a way, or with such an end in view that is necessarily an end for everyone (e.g. justice, freedom), for only this is an end in itself instead of an end for yourself.

superior, supra-sensuous power, this Godly power is transposed in Kant's analytic of the sublime to the supra-sensuous faculty of reason internal to the transcendental subject. Thus, I will explain in the following sections, the Kantian experience of the sublime does not revolve around the breaking in of something from without, which is to say, the momentary and no less astonishing feeling of being pervaded and overwhelmed by the all-might of an invisible Deity exercising its might through nature. Rather, it revolves around the breaking through, the sudden revelation, of a power from *within*: the supersensible power of reason that can think the unconditioned and unlimited, and guarantees the freedom of the subject as a rational, autonomous subject guided in its conducts by an unconditional moral law. As such, I will explain, the only true 'object' of the Kantian sublime is the Kantian subject itself.

The Mathematical Sublime

In spelling out his narcissistic model of sublime experience in the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant subdivides the sublime into the mathematical and dynamical sublime. Usually, twentieth-century critics interpret these two varieties of sublime experience as pertaining to theoretical or speculative and practical reason respectively. They can, however, also be elucidated by pointing to the eighteenth-century cult of the sublime as being a cult of empty and vast, but also of wild and violent nature: nature that appears boundless, without end, nature that appears threatening, without shelter; nature that cannot be grasped, nature that cannot be controlled. Roughly speaking, this parallels Kant's distinction between the mathematical and dynamical sublime respectively. Thus, the mathematical sublime refers to a feeling of frustration and delight in the encounter with, in Paul Guyer's words, "something quantitatively boundless [i.e. absolutely, incomparably great] in spatial and/or temporal extent" (Guyer 1996: 259). Conversely, the dynamical sublime refers to a feeling of fear and elevation in the confrontation with "something qualitatively boundless in force [i.e. natural might]" (ibid.: 259). However, such great and mighty objects merely seem to function as a vehicle for the Kantian subject to become aware of something great and mighty in itself.

As for the mathematical sublime, the sublime in terms of that which is comparable in size or greatness only to itself, the story runs as follows: the subject experiences a pleasurable pain as "the receptive side of the cognitive faculties (i.e. sensory perception, and imagination) is overwhelmed by the vastness and scale of some natural phenomenon" (Crowther 1996: 135-136). To explain the pain, Kant starts out by contrasting the estimation of such vastness in terms of concepts, which he identifies as mathematical, to the estimation of magnitude in intuition, which he calls aesthetic (Kant [1790] 1990a: §26, 94-95). The first is an estimation by means of numbers and the second an estimation in (a blink of) the eye: an immediate intuitive grasp of things as one complete and coherent whole.

Kant then goes on to say that since “the power of numbers extends to infinity” but the power of intuition does not, there is an absolute limit only to the aesthetic estimation of magnitude (ibid.: §26, 95). The mathematical estimation of magnitude is always relative, since a greater number is always possible. Yet in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude one’s physical scope encounters a limit beyond which apparently no ‘ever greater scope’ is possible. Only in such an aesthetic estimation of greatness one is therefore apt to call something “not alone great, but, without qualification, absolutely, and in every respect (beyond comparison) great, that is to say, sublime...It is a greatness comparable to itself alone” for which no “appropriate standard outside of itself” can be found (ibid.: §25, 93). And only in such an aesthetic estimation does the subject experience a high difficulty-degree: in counting one can go on indefinitely without much effort, yet in intuition one fruitlessly pains oneself to achieve an impossible, greatest, all-inclusive scope. Kant will henceforth associate this endless, successive counting with imaginative *apprehension*, and the aesthetic estimation of magnitude with *comprehension*.

Typically the armchair traveller-theorist of the sublime, Kant uses a second-hand example to illustrate the case: Savary’s account of the Pyramids of Cheops in Egypt (ibid.: §26, 96). From afar, when they look very small, the sight of these presents no problem. One can easily ‘place’ them visually in their totality. Closer by, however, the matter is altogether different. As I look up and down the Great Pyramid, I do not succeed in representing its various parts as one whole in one blink of the eye, at one glance. For as I focus on one part, try to retain it and combine it with other sighted parts (i.e. use my imaginative power), I already lose my visual grip on what I have focused on before – it literally escapes not just my view but also my visual memory as there is too much to be assimilated. Thus, all the time there is something, an excess that is left behind and left out, a rest or residue that sensibility as a whole cannot contain and retain. The Kantian subject experiences this failure of sensibility as painful. It wants totality and it cannot get it. It wants not just to apprehend (*auffassen*), to represent successively, it wants to comprehend (*zusammenfassen*): to have it all at once, in a single representation unifying these successive representations as co-existing (ibid.: §26, 95).

Why would this subject want this impossible because all-inclusive picture? Or rather, why does Kant make this subject want this impossible picture? It may, in this instance, be helpful to consult one of Kant’s own source-readings: Burke’s *Enquiry*, which Kant, along with other German theorists such as Lessing, Mendelssohn, Johann Georg Sulzer, Carl Grosse, and Christian Friedrich Michaelis, had carefully read. Though usually honourably marginalized as the King of Terror in the history of aesthetics, Burke had already stated that when confronted with some over-sized object, imagination cannot take in this object all at once. Here, Burke observes, as Kant would later do as well, “a perfect unity

can no more be arrived at, than...a compleat whole to which nothing may be added" (Burke 1990: II, sect. VII, 66-67). Instead, because this object cannot be bounded in perception, imagination is caught in an *open-ended, successive* reproduction of (the idea of) the parts of this object. This is what Kant will refer to as apprehension (*Auffassung*): to represent the parts of an excessively big object successively and potentially infinitely so, because this object cannot be comprehended.

In Burke's text, and I will discuss this in detail in chapter 2, the implication is that imagination fruitlessly labours to reach for a complete whole in such an endless, successive repetition of ideas of its own account, motivated by its own restlessness. This answer does not satisfy Kant. In his opinion, imagination is not motivated by itself to strive for comprehension, but by *the faculty of reason*. Or, in Kant's dramatic terms, the mind here listens to the voice of reason and this voice says: comprehend this or that phenomenon as an absolute totality, make the single intuition holding the many in one as great as possible (ibid.: §26, 98-99). This means that the desire to form such a complete picture is due to an *illegitimate interference of reason* in the realm of sensibility. Reason wants the latter to do something that it is, as witness its abortive efforts, not equipped to accomplish.

The idea behind this is the following. As Kant explains, comprehension is an idea of absolute totality, and absolute totality is an idea of reason. Now, if in looking at the Great Pyramid from the right angle I feel a compulsion to comprehend the entire Pyramid, with all its minute details, at a glance, this compulsion to comprehend is really a claim of reason forced on my sensibility: "the idea of the comprehension of any phenomenon whatsoever that may be given us in a whole of intuition, is an idea imposed on us by a law of reason" – whereby the latter "recognizes no definite, universally valid and unchangeable measure except the absolute whole" (ibid.: §27, 102). By contrast, apprehension (*Auffassung*) requires no such sum total. In apprehension, imagination would have encountered no difficulties or obstacles, would have happily (if not also rather frantically) continued its successive representations *ad infinitum* (ibid.: §26, 95). Only the imposition of an idea of comprehension, the urge to grasp an absolute whole, will painfully frustrate the power of imagination here. It must, yet cannot achieve this absolute whole, and this is how it comes to feel its own limits.

This means, firstly, that the trouble of imagination in the Kantian sublime depends on a subjective difference in approach: on the question whether one intuits an object in apprehension, or is compelled to comprehend it. Secondly, and more fundamentally, Kant's analysis shows that it is not a big object in nature or architecture (which for Kant would in any way be meaningless by itself), but an inordinate demand of reason that urges imagination to exceed its own limits. The pain of the sublime is thus caused by reason urging imagination to spend all its power of comprehension on an idea that cannot be realized or visualized.

Things get even more complicated at this point. So far, I have shown that the size of a phenomenon in nature or architecture is not of *decisive* importance to the Kantian experience of the sublime. What is decisive here is that, probably catalysed by the huge, inordinate size of a natural or architectural object relatively close to me, something starts happening 'inside': that reason starts to mess with sensibility and, in making its impossible claims, causes imagination to feel its own limits. If, on the basis of this, it becomes hard to trace the pain of the sublime unequivocally to a natural or architectural object, this becomes even harder when Kant suddenly drags the idea of infinity into it all. In the mathematical sublime, he says, reason "requires totality, and consequently comprehension in *one* intuition, and which calls for a *presentation* answering to all members of a progressively increasing...series of [apprehension]" (ibid.: §26, 98-99). From this requirement, Kant continues without motivation, reason "does not even exempt the infinite..., but rather renders it inevitable for us to regard this infinite...as *completely given* (i.e. given in its totality)" (ibid.: §26, 99). Could it be that Kant adds the infinite to these demands of reason so rashly, almost as a matter of course, because this infinite is the most extreme, the utmost example of an ever-increasing progression, extending (*ausdehnen*) indefinitely, which cannot be encompassed?

To answer this, it should first of all be recalled that the eighteenth-century experience of sublime nature is in effect a more or less displaced experience of the infinite. As Marjorie Hope Nicolson has shown long ago, the eighteenth-century aesthetics of the sublime is an aesthetics of the infinite inaugurated by seventeenth-century "[s]cientifically minded Platonists, reading their ideas of infinity into a God of Plenitude, then reading them out again, [and] transferred from God to Space to Nature conceptions of majesty, grandeur, vastness in which both admiration and awe were combined" (Hope Nicolson [1959] 1963: 143). Religious awe was transformed into an awe of infinite space, of infinite nature.

However, the problem now arises for Kant, can any visible phenomenon in nature or architecture ever be infinite? Does any such sensuous phenomenon in nature or architecture actually extend indefinitely? The answer is beyond the scope of this discussion, but it can be remarked that in a Kantian context the infinite can never be or become an object of perception. Obviously, no object of sense perceived in nature transcends all standards of sense. Otherwise, it would be a supersensible object (which is a contradiction within the terms) or, in the case of the infinitely small, invisible to the naked eye. Every sensuous object in nature – including its highest mountain, biggest ocean – is only relatively vast, even though such vast and formless objects cannot always be grasped in their "phenomenal totality" (Crowther 1989: 146). Even though, that is, my imagination cannot determine or put a full stop to these objects in aesthetic estimations of magnitude – which is why they *appear* to exceed all limits of sense, to

expand and continue without end. My own inadequacy here makes for an idea of infinity.

At the very least, this means that when I experience phenomena in nature or architecture as extending indefinitely because my aesthetic estimation of magnitude here never comes to a satisfying end, I am having a fake experience of infinity. Or, differently put, if for Kant only the infinite is truly sublime because nothing measures up against it, I can only experience sensuous objects as if they were sublime. This is, in fact Burke's argument in the *Enquiry*. As critics have so far ignored, Burke already observed long before Kant that an experience of the infinite in the visible world is at best fictional. For nature's sensuous objects are hardly ever infinite, the infinite can only manifest itself in nature as an illusion, so that one only experiences the effect of a *suggestion* of infinity. As he puts it:

Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime. *There are scarce any things which can become objects of our senses that are really, and in their own nature infinite.* But the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were really so. (Burke 1990: II, sect. VIII, 67, my emphases).⁶

This elegant solution to the problem does, however, not refrain Burke from calling nature sublime, or from attributing to nature, and the suggestions there made, the efforts of imagination to enlarge itself in trying to reach an ever next 'beyond'. For, Burke continues, such would-be infinite objects "impress the imagination with an idea of their progress beyond their actual limits", and it is this felt possibility of an indefinite progression which "can stamp on bounded objects the character of infinity" – albeit quite emphatically an "artificial infinity" (ibid.: II, sect. IX, 68).

By contrast, Kant is less playful and generous. Granted, he is not far removed from Burke when stating in the first *Critique* that the "true (transcendental) concept [*Begriff*] of infinity is: that the successive synthesis of unity in the measurement of a quantum can never be completed [*vollendet*, also connoting 'accomplished']" (Kant 1990: B460, 456). Infinity, as the cliché (still) goes, is an *Unvollendete*, an on-going work in progress. Endlessness cannot be bounded or encompassed on the time-conditioned level of sensibility, or else it will

⁶ As I will show in detail in chapter 2, Burke is here basing himself on John Locke's idea of infinity as expounded in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Locke here observes that the idea of infinity is based on a "power we observe in ourselves of repeating, without end, our own ideas": in this "endless repetition, there is continued an enlargement", or at least there is the open possibility of such a continuous enlargement, to which there is potentially no conclusion or resolution (Locke [1690] 1991: II, XVII, 98).

cease to be endless. The “absolute totality” of an “endless progression” will always, and necessarily, remain impossible as such a totality would be essentially “self-contradictory” (Kant 1990a: §26, 99). Or, in Burke’s terms, infinity can only be presented negatively or at best indeterminately, as only an ever-incomplete unity sustains the illusion of an indefinite continuation on account of its very unfinished- or unaccomplished-ness. In such cases, imagination “has no rest” because it cannot “fix a boundary”, just as for Kant imagination never completes its synthesis as it never stops failing to encompass a big quantum as whole (Burke 1990: II, sect. IX, 68).⁷

Unlike Burke, however, Kant is not content to ascribe intimations of infinity to cunning deceptions and games of make-believe alone. On the contrary, according to him the failure of imagination to comprehend must here be attributed entirely to the fact that infinity is one of those extravagant ideas of reason without an object. Infinity, as he had already argued in the first *Critique*, is ‘just an idea’: an empty idea. For such an idea, no instance can be offered or presented (*dargestellt*) in sensibility. Within this context, imagination’s unfinished synthesis serves to underline the Kantian dictum that ideas of reason – such as the infinite – *cannot be used constitutively*. That is to say, the fact that the synthesis of unity remains incomplete or undetermined (*unbedingt*) in this instance exemplifies, as it were, experientially the Kantian rule that an idea of reason “is and must remain undetermined”; i.e. can never become an object of cognition (Pries 1995: 161, my translation). Now, if only the truly infinite is sublime and if this infinite is strictly an idea of reason that cannot be positively realized on the level of sensibility, this means that “the sublime is not to be looked for in the things of nature, but only in our own ideas” (Kant 1990a: §25, 93-94). It means, in effect, that the pain of the sublime is not to be traced to a would-be infinite, over-sized object in nature, nor even to the compulsion to comprehend such an object in a whole of intuition, but to an intrusive reason ordering imagination: *give me an instance of infinity as absolute totality*. And imagination sets to work. And it fails – it fails as a rule.

If this failure is appropriate within the larger scheme of Kant’s transcendental critique, then it is also not without result. For the crux of the matter is that *in this failure, in the pain experienced on the level of imagination, the Kantian subject is awakened to the superior capacities of its supersensible faculty of reason. Pain is not felt for nothing, it is felt to*

⁷To hypothetically pursue the parallel a bit further, in the analytic of the sublime Kant rather mischievously ascribes a “boundlessness” to imagination; a “striving for infinite progress” [*ein Bestreben zum Fortschritte ins Unendliche*] in the successive apprehension of parts, which precisely betrays its *limits* or *incapacity* (Kant 1990a: §26, 101; §25, 94). That is to say, the fact that in the encounter with seemingly infinite objects of sense imagination cannot adequately conclude its synthesis indicates the absence of the ability to fix a comprehensive boundary. Boundless, endless, restless, as in: progressing *ad infinitum*, here easily comes to mean: fruitless.

disclose an inner truth to me: it not just points to the limits of sensuous presentation, but also to the limitless extent of my reason. If, after all, the pain of the sublime is caused by an idea of reason that exceeds even the greatest greatness in nature, and also the greatest power of sensibility (i.e. infinity as absolute totality), that very pain also attest to a side of my being which is able to *think* such an idea. It attests to a supra-sensuous side of my being that is capable of forming ideas in comparison with which sensibility, *and even nature, dwindles into insignificance* (ibid.: §26, 101). It attests to the fact that, in so far as I have a reason, I am also elevated far above the life of sense: that I myself embody the sublime. For as soon as I become aware that it is my very own reason that is giving my imagination so much pain and trouble, my initial feeling of being frustrated on the level of sensibility is turned into the opposite realization of being happily unbounded on the level of reason. This self-realization, earned through pain, is what ultimately composes the soul-stirring delight of the Kantian sublime.

I, Sublimity

What can first of all be concluded from all this is that Kantian sublime experience is evidently governed by a dialectical law. This law dictates that pain or frustration is meant to prove its opposite: that the subject's frustration of being limited on the level of sensibility is not the end of it, but in fact "awakens the consciousness of an unlimited faculty of the same subject" (ibid.: §27, 104). *Through* the inadequacy of imagination the superiority and infinite scope of reason is disclosed. Or, as Andrew Bowie explains this dialectical mechanism, because "we feel our limits we must *also* feel what is not limited in ourselves, otherwise we would have no way of being aware of a limit": we can only interpret sensibility as inadequate by virtue of a higher inner vantage point (Bowie 1993: 37). Thus, a felt limit yields its own beyond: the 'positive' or self-affirming (the feeling of delight due to the realization of an internal limitlessness) not just emerges out of, but is *presupposed in* the 'negative' or self-problematising (the painful feeling of being limited on the level of sensibility). Frustration is resolved – removed and sublimated – into a subject-validating experience of self-elevation.

Secondly, and in relation to this, in tracing and reducing the mathematical sublime to ideas of reason, Kant seems to put the essentially humble, eighteenth-century experience of sublime nature entirely on its head. In that more humble version, found in many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century traveller accounts, the subject is supposed to feel small and trivial in the face of giant and apparently immeasurable nature. By contrast, in Kant's version, the subject becomes the giant and nature the dwarf. It is no longer nature but the subject to which the feeling of a reverent awe finalizing this experience applies. If the infinite, according to Nicolson, was transferred from God to nature in the seventeenth- and eighteenth centuries, it is now transferred from nature to the subject:

...the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect [*Achtung*] for our own vocation [i.e. our own 'humanity' as rational beings], which we attribute to an object of nature by a certain subreption (substitution of a respect for the object in place of one for the idea of humanity in our own self – the subject); and this feeling renders, as it were, intuitable the supremacy of our cognitive faculties on the rational side over the greatest faculty of sensibility [i.e. imagination]. (ibid.: §27, 102)

Nature deserves of no respect (*Achtung*). Not just because for Kant respect is a moral feeling that applies to rational beings, not to things.⁸ Rather also, because even – if not especially – nature's largest, biggest, greatest, highest phenomena cannot compete with reason's infinite potential: it is "for us a law (of reason)...to estimate everything which is for us great in nature as small in comparison with ideas of reason" (ibid.: §27, 102). Vast nature here at best figures as a projection of the vast extent of my rational comprehension: in so far as my imagination fails to present a big, apparently formless object of sense as completely given in one blink of the eye, this object externalises or "renders intuitable [*anschaulich*]" the felt boundlessness of reason (ibid.: §27, 104). This is not to say that such an object in any way measures up to the idea of infinity, but that in imagination's inability to fix a boundary for it, this object vivifies reason's pre-eminence over sensibility. It is to say that in my encounters with apparently endless nature, my troubled imagination effectively, though somewhat contra-intuitively, allows the infinite scope and potential of reason to reveal itself to me. Or, as Crowther puts it, "the sensible object 'realizes' the scope of rational conceptualisation precisely (and paradoxically) because it cannot be grasped as a totality at the perceptual and imaginative level" (Crowther 1989: 147).

In more basic terms, this means that nature in the Kantian sublime really only serves to make me feel better about myself. Any greatness it presents I can appropriate as my own, and more than that, any greatness it presents I eventually estimate as shrinking and shrivelling in comparison with the felt limitlessness of my rational comprehension. In the end, after all, nature can never live up to my ideas of reason; all it can do is merely *suggest* – that is, present in an incomplete or insufficient way – their infinite extent. The real thing, the 'truly infinite', is within. Grand nature is to help me realize this, and then to be ungratefully disposed of as a forgery of the sublime, undeserving of any feeling of respect. Perhaps all it is meant to do is to provide a suitable setting for a

⁸As Kant argues in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, "[r]espect always refers to persons, never to things. The latter can elicit an inclination, and, where animals (cf. horses, dogs, etc.) are concerned, even love, but never respect" (Kant [1788] 1956: 197). Respect points to 'our' elevated, supersensible vocation as rational beings. And this is precisely what the inadequacy of imagination is meant to bring home to the subject in Kant's account of the sublime: it is meant to awaken me to that side of my being which floats far above the determinations of sense.

felt 'passage' from my sensible to my rational being: from a conditioned to an unbounded, unconditioned inner vantage point, which answers to my supersensible vocation. Seen in this light, little can go wrong in the experience of the mathematical sublime as regards the eventual triumph of the Kantian subject: whatever overwhelms imagination cannot *but* be transcended by reason. Even granting the fact that Kant consistently posits the merely *regulative* status of sublime experience as a self-experience – i.e. describes it merely as it *should* evolve, what it *ought* to give rise to – then the law of reason, which I am bound to recognize, and which states that even nature's greatest greatness is small in relation to my supersensible ideas, cannot *but* in actual fact awaken me to my supersensible vocation (Kant 1990a: §27, 103). The only possible 'but' in the matter is that I must have sufficiently developed my faculty of reason – which for Kant is a condition that can only be met with in white, male, cultured subjects. Females (or, what is constructed as 'female' in Kantian philosophy) and other others are to be excluded from the self-exultation experienced in the sublime (Battersby 1995: 92).⁹

Thus, at least for the male-connoted subject, Kantian sublime experience is in principle a basically a risk-free exercise in self-elevation and self-congratulation: however much vast nature may frustrate one's sensibility, one's ideas of reason will always supersede and be the better of it. Ultimately, the law of reason dictating that as a rational being, the Kantian subject will invariably outwit nature, makes for a safety net that will always, and by definition, place this subject on the winning side. Compare it to mainstream Hollywood movies, whereby any tension felt along the way is merely a handy means to heighten the cathartic effect of a happy ending that has been very much settled in advance. In just the same way, tension or frustration in the Kantian sublime is merely a necessary stage within the larger process of being lifted upward by negative means: a process which, however painful, humiliating, or unnerving always moves to a conclusive and satisfying ending for the male-connoted Kantian subject as a rational being.

The Dynamical Sublime

In the dynamical sublime, this process of self-affirmation will be much the same. The only difference is, firstly, that it makes more explicit the moral import of the sublime feeling and, secondly, that it turns not on imagination but on the will. The dynamical sublime feeling thus does not

⁹This is not because the Kantian-conceived 'female' cannot develop her faculty of reason but because she *need* and *should* not develop it: all she needs to be is charming and alluring, beautiful, so as to increase her marketability – and for Kant a woman with a sufficiently developed reason undermines her own marketability. As Battersby points out, Kant believes that such rational activity would only make her ugly [*ekelhaft*]. Indeed, Battersby quotes Kant from his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764), a woman with an active knowledge in Greek, mathematics, or mechanics, might "even as well have a beard" – might, in other words, even as well be a 'male' (*ibid.*: 92). I will pursue this matter in some detail later in this chapter, in the section entitled 'Heroism and Humility'.

arise out of frustration in the face of boundless nature but out of an apparent helplessness in the face of violent nature. Pain here signals the pain of terror, not of imaginative inadequacy.

Thus, in the dynamical sublime nature is to be “represented as a source of fear”, yet this fear should *not* be “seriously entertained” (Kant 1990a: §28, 106). Joseph Addison and Edmund Burke had already stated as much: awful things can only give rise to a sublime feeling when witnessed from a position of relative safety; the terror of the sublime must always needs be a *fictive* terror. As Addison puts it in the *Spectator* nr. 418 of June 30, 1712, any terrible sight or prospect can easily become delightful in a fictional context, since then “we are not a little pleased” with the awareness of our position as mere on-lookers (Addison [1712] 1996: 68). In this risk-free situation, whatever appears simply threatening or “hideous” in ‘real life’ is now considered “at the same time, as dreadful and harmless; so that the more frightful appearance they make, the greater is the pleasure we receive from our own safety” (ibid.: 68). For that very same reason, “we are delighted with the reflecting upon dangers that are past, or in looking on a precipice at a distance, which would fill us with a different kind of horror, if we saw it hanging over our heads” (ibid.: 68). ‘We’ would then not be pleased at all.

Kant, likewise, points out that in the experience of the dynamical sublime my confrontation with wild nature is not to be real or actual, but imaginary: I *imagine* myself being threatened by say, a storm, a volcano or a wild sea. It is *as if* I am present at a scene facing me with my own vulnerability and ephemerality. This brings about a painful sense of powerlessness: I realize that nature can devour my physical being as easily and instantly as, say, I can swat a fly. I am faced with my ultimate and unavoidable fate of death. However, the delight that such an imaginary scene of violence can bring about is for Kant not simply due to the simple fact that it is, precisely, only imaginary. That, in other words, my fears are merely fictive and I am, for the time being, on the safe side. Indeed, Kant grants, delight is here brought about by a sense of being comfortably removed from nature’s threats. Yet, this comfort is not brought about by a merely physical or temporal but by a *spiritual* distance. It is, more precisely, brought about by the consciousness of my freedom from nature as a morally autonomous being.

To fully understand this, it must first of all be recalled that in the experience of the mathematical sublime, “we found our own limitations” on the level of sensibility, yet through or because of this also “found in our rational faculty another non-sensuous standard...in comparison with which everything in nature is small, and so found in our own minds a pre-eminence over nature even in its immeasurability” (Kant 1990a: §28, 107). All is well that ends well: nature first big, now small, the subject first limited, now unlimited. This self-fulfilling principle also reigns in the experience of the dynamical sublime, albeit not my theoretical but more explicitly my practical reason which now guarantees a happy ending. What happens here, Kant explains, is that

the irresistibility [*Unwiderstehlichkeit*] of the might of nature¹⁰ forces upon us the recognition of our physical helplessness as beings of nature, but at the same time reveals a faculty [i.e. practical reason] of estimating ourselves as independent of nature, and discovers a pre-eminence [*Überlegenheit*] above nature that is the foundation of a self-preservation of quite another kind from that which may be assailed and brought into danger by external nature. This saves humanity in our own person from humiliation, even though as mortal men we have to submit to external violence. (Kant *ibid.*: §28, 107)

The “self-preservation of quite another kind” is an overt allusion to Burke and, maybe, Addison. Whereas their existential (the term is Paul Crowther’s) reading of the sublime ‘merely’ focuses on a felt “sense of our own mortality” in the face of possible dread and disaster, Kant sublimates this into a felt sense of our own morality (Crowther 1996: 126). The centrality of physical self-preservation in the sublime feeling is thus replaced by an urgency for moral self-preservation. In fact, and interestingly so, the implication is that any such moral self-preservation can only succeed when one transcends – or, as it would be termed today, suppresses – the ‘baser’ anxieties and needs for physical self-preservation. Only in this way will I be spared the humiliation of bowing before nature’s physical might.

This is, indeed, exactly what constitutes the delight of the Kantian sublime: to find myself saved from any such humiliation. To find, that is, a presence within myself, a supersensible side to my being, which will not be intimidated by nature and makes me act bravely, freely, and selflessly. This ‘higher’ presence within me, Kant says, is the supersensible power of practical reason, freeing me from nature in so far as it makes me act in compliance only with that moral law which it writes for itself – and not in subservience to the threats and determinations of nature.

Knowing this, the experience of the dynamical sublime can be epitomized as a lesson in moral distinction: I imagine myself being threatened by nature at its most violent, and I feel intimidated. Yet in my helplessness I listen to the voice of a power of practical reason within me that transcends any base fear or anxiety. Thus, I would awaken to the fact that I am not only a being of sense but also a being of reason: imagination has presented me with a case in which my mind “can make itself sensible to the appropriate sublimity of the sphere of its own being, even above nature” (Kant 1990a: §28, 108). This, according to Kant,

¹⁰What Kant has in mind here are volcanoes, hurricanes, wild and angry oceans, thunder clouds, etc., in comparison with which one’s (physical) power of resistance seems but trifle. Hence the term: irresistible [*unwiderstehlich*] here; such phenomena cannot be withstood. Yet there is also a pun here, for, as Kant repeats Addison, these very same phenomena become “all the more attractive” – and attractiveness, too, may imply: hard to resist – when in considering them “our own position is secure” (Kant 1990a: §28, 106).

would grant me a delightful sense of security and superiority, allowing me to assert myself admirably and independently. Whatever dangers nature may present to me as a natural being, it cannot touch me morally – and I know it (Guyer 1996: 262).

If this reduces destructive nature to being a mere occasion for my coming out as a heroic subject, it in fact turns out to be even less than that. For (as with the experience of the mathematical sublime) it is very much the question if it is at all nature, and not my 'higher' self, which causes my physical being the pain of feeling small and intimidated. If, that is, my sense of impotence and insignificance; my meaning nothing in the face of mighty nature, is not an externalisation of the felt meaninglessness of my worldly concerns – such as the preservation of my life, my well-being, and physical comfort – in the face of an *internal, unconditional moral law*. Am I not so much experiencing nature as my 'higher' self here? Kant suggests as much when he states that destructive nature

...appeals to a power in us (which is not nature) to regard that for which we are anxious [as physical beings] (worldly goods, health, and life), as small, and hence [because this power in us is not nature] to regard [nature's] might...as exercising over us and our personality no such rude dominion that we should bow down before it, once the question becomes one of our highest principles and of our forsaking or asserting them. (Kant 1990a: §28, 107-108, my emphasis)

Kant here has practical reason appropriate the might of nature in its violation and subjection of sensibility (Van de Vall 1994: 294). In itself, this subjection may be painful, but for Kant it is also the upshot for an intense delight: it makes me aware of my supersensible, moral vocation which, precisely, "must be realized at the expense of sensibility" – i.e. at the expense of the interests of sense (ibid.: 295). Pain is felt for a purpose, it is part of the sacrifice I must make as a 'being of nature' to grow into an autonomous being of reason. To experience this pain in the dynamical sublime is therefore *also* to experience my destiny as such an autonomous being, determined in my conduct by an unconditional moral law. Indeed, this pain discloses to me on an experiential level the existence of this law *within* me. As such, it yields the exalting realization that I myself partake of the free and unconditional. It brings home to me that I have a power transcending my physical, conditioned being and *therefore*, since it is *only* this physical being in me that is susceptible to nature, transcending nature too: "Sublimity is...contained in no object of nature, but only in our own mind, so far as we can become conscious of being superior to nature within us [i.e. the life of sense] and therefore of nature outside us (in so far as it influences us)" (Kant 1990a: §28, 110).

Dynamical sublime experience thus happily concludes as an experience of my being removed at a great and safe distance from nature, of my being *Erhaben*. It is, for Kant, a definite indication of my

being proof against “nature’s effect, whether by threat or gratification, on the inclinations within [me], which could lead to the heteronomous rather than autonomous determination of the will” (Guyer 1996: 263). Seen in this light, Guyer rightfully concludes, “sublimity must be contrasted to nature rather than ascribed to it” (ibid.: 263). Kantian sublime experience is not an experience of but an experience *in contrast* or *opposition* to nature, an experience of my own contrast to nature as a being of reason.

Heroism and Humility

As part of the realization of one’s ‘moral destiny’, the courageousness and fearlessness displayed in Kant’s dynamical sublime experience will, of course, seem hopelessly outdated from a present-day perspective. Typically, it celebrates and idealizes the “man who is undaunted, who knows no fear, and who, therefore, does not give way to danger, but sets manfully to work with full deliberation” (Kant 1990a: §28, 108). Kant mentions the soldier, the general, implying that only those who, as Christine Battersby says, “have been educated into confidence in the power of [their] own ego over nature” are capable of appreciating dangerous objects and transcending their fears at the same time (Battersby 1995: 95). Indeed, Battersby continues, for Kant a “man proves his superior moral excellence by his ability to experience the sublime” (ibid.: 96). Today, one may at best encounter such signs of ‘moral excellence’ in twentieth-century Westerns and its endless varieties: a John Wayne-like heroism dictating that ‘a man has to do what a man has to do’, answering to a universal call to duty.

From that same present-day perspective, moreover, the delight and freedom gained from the realization of one’s moral destiny may be rightfully questioned. For is it all that delightful to feel the pressure and dominance of practical reason? Of a categorical imperative that makes me act contrary to my interests of sense? Is that not a very harsh and humiliating, albeit a self-humiliating, experience? Yes, Freudian psychologists would say, and from their perspective it is hard to disagree. Slavoj Žižek, for instance, equating the moral law within the Kantian subject with the Freudian super ego, points to this “basic paradox of the Kantian autonomy: I am a free and autonomous subject, delivered from the constraints of my pathological nature precisely and only insofar as my feeling of self-esteem is crushed by the humiliating pressure of the moral Law” (Žižek 1994: 52). I am free in so far as I victimize myself, in so far as I hurt and debase my embodied being.

However, I have shown, from Kant’s perspective this “humiliating pressure” is not humiliating at all as it makes the transcendental subject aware that it, too, partakes of the unconditional: that it is not simply subjected to a law, but writes its own law, that it is a free, integral (rather than a self-conflicting) subject released from external determinations, and incorporating in its supersensible regions the (moral) might and autonomy once reserved for the invisible Deity ‘above’.

The differences between Kant's analysis of the sublime and earlier, religiously connoted theories are, for that matter, striking. Consider, for instance, John Dennis's rather ominous remarks in *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) that

...nothing is so terrible as the Wrath of infinite Power, because nothing is so unavoidable as the Vengeance design'd by it. There is no flying nor lying hid from the great universal Monarch. He may deliver us from all other Terrors, but nothing can save or defend us from him. And therefore Reason, which serves to dissipate our Terrors in some other Dangers, serves but to augment them when we are threatened by infinite Power; and that Fortitude, which may be heroick at other times, is downright Madness then. (Dennis 1943: I, 362)

Kant, we have seen, would propose exactly the reverse in what might be called a liberation of the son (the male-connoted subject) from the father (the male-connoted Deity): the subject transcends itself, throwing itself not in the hands of the Deity, but relying on its own 'higher' self. For the time being, however, critics like Addison, theorists like Lord Shaftesbury, and sensitive poets such as Thomas Gray continued to look upon the thrilling, awe-inspiring terrors of sublime nature as being 'pregnant with religion' – rather than, as with Kant, as being suggestive of the infinite might and extent of reason. Accordingly, their response to the terrors that the Deity allegedly exercises through nature is one diametrically opposed to what Kant later propagates: it is one of subservience and humility.

This, Murray Roston has explained, is in fact the only proper and possible response for the faithful subject. In accordance with ruling Christian doctrines, humility offers the only hope of salvation *from* the very terrors excited by the awful omnipotence of the Deity (Roston 1990: 229-230). That is to say, since the Deity commands the earth, the seas, and the heavens, and since it is thus also the Deity that dwarfs wo/man into insignificance before the "vast might" of nature, the appropriate reaction here – says Dennis – is not stubborn pride or 'fortitude' but subjection and surrender. In times of distress, when nature turns wild, one should turn to the Lord in "humble prayer" so as to be liberated from this very distress again: humility finally makes for a sense of safety, a faith in salvation, and safety kindles the relief that makes the simply terrible sublime (Roston 1990: 229).

To substantiate this link between humility and a tension-removing feeling of relief Roston here also refers to Psalm 107 ("They that go down to the sea in ships") as quoted in Joseph Addison's reflections on the sublime spectacle of a wild sea in the *Spectator* 489, September 20, 1712:

They that go down to the Sea in Ships, that do Business in great Waters: These see the Works of the Lord, and his Wonders in the

Deep. For he commandeth and raiseth the stormy Wind, which lifteth up the Waters thereof. They mount to Heaven, they go down again to the Depths, their Soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken Man, and are at their Wit's End. Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of their Distress. He maketh the Storm a Calm, so that the Waves thereof are still. Then they are glad because they be quiet, so he bringeth them unto their desired Heaven. (ibid.: 229-230)

In later eighteenth-century Germany, Paul Guyer reports, Johann Georg Sulzer would still promote a similar attitude of humbleness in the face of sublime nature. Reassurance, a feeling of safety, is here eventually derived from the faith and trust that if the Lord will "preserve and love us, this is...because he is infinite, and his goodness spreads itself over all his creatures" (Sulzer [1770] in Guyer 1996: 241).

Thus, the dictum of these pre-Kantian accounts of religious tremor is: in God we trust, and this trust grants a certainty of protection making even the sight of the most violent sea or mighty storm delightful. By the end of the eighteenth century, Kant would transform this into: in myself I trust. I am not dependent on but independent of, if not equal to, an (unknown) Other. Not my faith in God but my faith in my own rational superiority over nature's expanse instills in me the sense of security that occasions the delight of the sublime. Kant elevates rather than humbles humanity in the experience of the sublime, offering a transcendental subject standing in awe "of the power of [its] own reason rather than of God. Indeed, God's creation is humbled before [its] own free reason" (ibid: 259).

Unfortunately however, as with the mathematical sublime, the delights of such an experience of self-elevation are not awarded to just anyone at all. They are only reserved for the exclusive few who have sufficiently developed their capacity for moral autonomy: white 'cultured' males. Thus, Battersby observes on the basis of Kant's pre-critical *Observations* and the *Anthropology* (1798), "there is no inference that women should be educated in the kinds of courage and self-confidence that would enable them to rise above fear" and experience the Kantian sublime (Battersby 1995: 96). On the contrary, Battersby concludes with a view to Kant's comments on the characteristics of the sexes in the *Anthropology*:

...it is important for women to be timorous in the face of physical danger. Since the future of the human race is in the hands – or, rather, the womb – of women, to ensure the continuance of the species women should be concerned with their own physical safety...But this is an important rider to the Kantian system, because such feelings will debar women from developing *Achtung*; that reverential attitude necessary for experiencing the sublime; for acting in accordance with universal duty...(ibid.: 96)

Unlike men, women in their Kantian construction have thus “no duty” to become a person – i.e. a rational, moral being. Instead, though counting as “humans”, they have a duty to remain akin to what Kant calls “instinct-driven ‘animals’ ” (ibid.: 96). Instead of facing danger and transcending their fear, they should run away from it and, securing their physical well-being, secure the procreation of the species with it. Heroism is reserved for men, humility and timidity for women.

Harmonizing the Sublime

Thus, in the Kantian scheme of things, the strength and power associated with the dynamical sublime is attributed to the male-connoted subject, while the weakness and charm associated with the beautiful is assigned to the childbearing ‘female’. However, if this implies a binary (gender-connoted) opposition between the sublime and the beautiful, it nevertheless turns out that the Kantian *judgement* of the sublime differs not fundamentally from the Kantian judgement of the beautiful. Not, that is, because both judgements are in the final analysis issued by Kant’s male-constructed subject, but because formally both judgements have something in common: they pertain to what Kant calls a *subjective finality*.

Quite simply put, subjective finality here refers to something purposeful, and fundamentally pleasurable, with respect to the subject. For instance, I have shown, in the experience of both the mathematical and dynamical sublime, the pain felt by imagination on account of the interference of reason in its domain is not without a purpose. It is not a pain that is felt for nothing. This pain, rather, is the gateway to a delightful self-realization: because of it, I realize I am not just a being of sense but also a being of reason, placing me far above nature’s determinations.

Now, if pain has a subjective finality in moving me from my sensuous to my rational being, would this not also mean that the conflict [*Widerstreit*] between reason and sensibility in the Kantian sublime is not really a conflict at all but rather a merely *apparent* one, holding its own (re)solution? The answer has proved to be open to many different interpretations. Already in 1877, for instance, Paul Deussen suggests in his *Elemente der Metaphysik* that in elevating oneself to one’s moral, autonomous being in the (dynamical) sublime, the fear felt by one’s physical being is not completely exorcised but remains floating “in the background of our consciousness” – without, however, troubling our “own I” [*eigenes Ich*] (Deussen [1877] 1919: 157, my translation). This would also mean that the discord between sensibility and reason never entirely disappears: in this half-conscious fear, a trace is left of sensibility’s (futile) resistance against the might of practical reason and the fearlessness and selflessness it requires. Deussen’s reading is, however, not so much rooted in Kant’s as in Arthur Schopenhauer’s post-Kantian notion of sublime experience as a feeling of exaltation, a feeling of

transcendence, gained through pain and labour which is nevertheless constantly accompanied by the consciousness of un-freedom, of being tied to the Will.

More recently, Christine Pries has more or less comparably proposed in her comparative analysis of Kant's first and third *Critiques* that the conflict between the faculties in the Kantian sublime is a fundamental one which cannot be entirely removed. In her view, the transition from sensibility (pain) to reason (pleasure) in the Kantian sublime is really no conclusive and harmonious passage from the one to the other at all. Rather, she argues, this transition (which she refers to as a transition without bridges, without mediation) amounts to a mere change of perspective – a fluctuating spasm oscillating between sensibility and reason – that lacks the sense of an ending or resolution (Pries 1995: 156-162). That is to say, according to her, the fact that the Kantian subject changes from the perspective of sensibility to the perspective of reason in the experience of the sublime does not mean that the gap between sensibility and reason is, in any way, bridgeable or passable. Due to their mutual incompatibility, there is an abyss between the two excluding any 'settlement' or mediation, which makes it impossible for ideas of reason to be ever realized within the image-forming domain of sensibility. The so-called harmony of the faculties thus covers up an internal conflict that remains – and, according to the tenets of the first *Critique*, remains irresolvable.

However, in my own reading of Kant's conflict between the faculties I rather side with Paul Guyer and Paul Crowther. Thus, Crowther argues convincingly that the relation between reason and imagination is ultimately not so much discordant as *harmonious*, not so much typified by a break as by a "continuity" between the two: within their very differences, they are in agreement in so far as the pain felt by the former on account of the latter serves to reveal the subject's rational, moral superiority over nature (Crowther 1996: 146). Or, as Kant himself puts it, the very same pain or violence "that is wrought on the subject through the imagination is estimated as final [i.e. purposeful and delightful] for the whole determination [*Bestimmung*] of mind" as including the faculty of reason and its ungraspable ideas as well as the moral law that it writes for itself (Kant 1990a: §27, 104). This means that in their apparent conflict, reason and sensibility have not worked *against* but *with* each other to engender an insight into my pre-eminence over and freedom from nature. Together, and each in their very own way, they have helped to show that I am not just a being of sense but also of being reason. Thus, they have disclosed my supersensible vocation, my 'higher', glorious destiny, to me.

Given this ultimate accord or agreement between imagination and reason, Kantian sublime experience is not that far removed from the Kantian experience of the beautiful. Both feelings, I will presently show, concern a finally accordant play between two mental faculties, the former being somewhat more 'grave' [*Ernsthaft*] than the latter. The

reason for this similarity is that both the feeling of the beautiful and the feeling of the sublime are ultimately rooted in a so-called *aesthetic judgement*: a judgement referring to a *specific or distinctive, harmonious mental state of a subject* rather than to certain particularities of a represented object.¹¹ In case of the beautiful, bearing on agreeable form, this relation refers to a free and harmonious play between imagination and understanding. This play exemplifies and makes felt a relationship between these two cognitive faculties which, as Guyer quotes Kant from the First Introduction to the third *Critique*, “is the subjective...condition of the objective use of judgement in general” (Guyer 1996: 152). That is to say, although aesthetic judgements are no cognitive judgements, the relation between imagination and understanding shows how the two complement each other in a co-operation conducive to cognitive judgements. The Kantian subject experiences the satisfaction of this basic condition for cognition – manifested in the felt, harmonious relationship between imagination and

¹¹Thus, if one calls, say, a flower beautiful or a mountain sublime the judgemental epithets ‘beautiful’ and ‘sublime’ do *not*, strictly speaking, apply to that flower or mountain but by contrast express a specific relation between two mental faculties of the *subject* contemplating these respective objects. I deliberately use the term ‘contemplating’ in this instance, because it implies for Kant a certain distanced- and disinterestedness on the part of the subject that is appropriate both in relation to the beautiful and sublime: aesthetic judgements are “indifferent” to the real existence of objects, which is to say that one does not will, covet, or desire such objects but takes a pleasure in their mere representation (*Vorstellung*); or, in their formal relation to the subject (Kant 1990a: §5, 46.). This simply means that I do not take a pleasure in this object for my own sake but – allegedly – for *its* own sake. Aesthetic judgements are therefore without interest; I do not want the represented object. They are, moreover, also without a concept; I do not cognise the represented object. When I say: this flower is red, this is not the same as when I say: this flower is beautiful. In the first case, I determine an object by means of general rules and forms of the understanding, whereby ‘grey’ is a predicate applying to ‘stone’. In the second case, however, it may appear as if ‘beautiful’ is a predicate applying to ‘stone’ but it in fact applies to the mental state of the subject; it is *this mental state which is ultimately being judged*. Here I do not produce an objective, conceptual unity of recognition, but I express the awareness of a feeling of pleasure, or displeasure on account of an internal, mental state. Thus, “[the judging subject] will speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a quality of the object and the judgement logical (forming a cognition of the object by concepts of it); although it is only aesthetic, and contains merely a reference of the representation of the object to the subject...” (ibid.: §6, 49). Both in the case of the beautiful and the sublime my judgement will thus at the very best apply to the representation of an object in reference to my perceptual interaction with it. This is even more radical in case of the sublime, for while it is correct to interpret a judgement with the form ‘x is sublime’ as ‘I feel myself sublime (i.e. elevated) with respect to nature’, one cannot say ‘I feel myself beautiful with respect to this or that object’. This means, as Gernot Böhme explains, that one’s pleasure in the beautiful “is not itself the ground of the judgement ‘x is beautiful’ but a necessary consequence of it” (Böhme 1997: 41, my translation). Or, as Kant puts it, “[f]or the beautiful in nature we must seek a ground outside ourselves, but for the sublime one merely in ourselves and the attitude of mind that introduces sublimity into the representation of nature” (Kant 1990a: §23, 90). For more extensive accounts of Kant’s aesthetic judgement see Dieter Henrich (1992: 29-58), Paul Crowther (1996: 56-61), or Paul Guyer (1996: 94-116).

understanding – as subjectively final or purposeful and purely pleasurable.

Conversely, and as I have shown, the aesthetic judgement of the sublime bears on a subjective relationship between imagination and reason that appears not altogether unproblematic and that is not experienced as simply pleasurable: sublime experience involves a painful blockage or *Hemmung* branding it as a pleasure mediated through a displeasure (Kant 1990a: §27, 105). Nevertheless, Kant insists, like the experience of the beautiful, the experience of the sublime “preserves its aesthetic character”. Not merely, that is, because it bears on a “subjective play of the mental powers (imagination and reason)”, but also because it represents this play as “*harmonious*” – not *despite* but *because of* the very tension occasioned between these different powers of mind (Kant 1990a: §27, 103, my emphasis). As such, aesthetic judgements of the sublime refer to the same possibility of an “overall integrity of our faculties of mind” as the judgement of the beautiful (Makkreel 1994: 83). For as we have seen, imagination and reason only, and only initially, *appear* to be in conflict but are ultimately judged as being in accord for the whole determination of mind. Therefore, the difference between the beautiful and sublime may be that the former occasions pleasure and the latter pleasure through pain, but they are nevertheless tightly connected to the extent that both in the experience of the beautiful and the experience of the sublime “the faculty of presentation, or the imagination, is regarded as being in harmony...with the *faculty of concepts* of understanding or reason” respectively (ibid.: §23, 74).

This generic relation between the ‘negative pleasure’ of the sublime and the ‘positive pleasure’ of the beautiful is reinforced in the *Anthropology*. Kant here remarks that the “*sublime*, it is true, is the counterpart [*Gegenwicht*] but not the opposite [*Widerspiel*] of the beautiful” (Kant 1960: §67, 428). The two constitute, so to speak, two sides of the same coin, in that the latter “prepares us...to love nature even without interest”, and the former prepares us to “admire” nature “even in spite of our (sensible) interest” (Kant 1990a: General Remark, 114). Both the feeling of the beautiful and the feeling of the sublime, in other words, revolve around a disinterestedness, a being removed from physical nature, which exposes the Kantian subject as a free and autonomous being, drawing its pure pleasures out of the possible integrity and complementariness of its own mental faculties.

The necessity of this realization of an internal harmony that is to bring Kantian sublime experience to a delightful end is what, in my view, accounts for the reconciliatory law governing this experience. That is to say, because Kant insists on positing sublime experience as a variety of aesthetic judgement – referring to an accord between two mental faculties – he must somehow find a way to represent negative feelings of pain (frustration or helplessness) as ultimately positive. He must represent an aching discord between imagination and reason as being ultimately,

and in reality, a special agreement. He must, in a word, sacrifice the internal tension of the sublime feeling to the harmony of the beautiful.

The Narrative Structure of Kantian Sublime Experience

However, it may now be objected, if Kant's analytic of the sublime thus opens the way for a harmonization of the sublime, he nevertheless upholds the significance of 'negative', self-undermining feelings such as frustration and terror: despite Kant's stress on the harmony of the faculties, and despite his tendency to reduce sublime experience to a steady process of (self-)sublimation, he never overrides the presence of pain in that experience. Granted – but it must be added immediately that pain only features prominently here because Kant needs pain too much to reinforce the superior position of the transcendental subject. Pain, I have said, is for Kant a purposeful pain through which my vocation as a rational being is revealed to me. If an initial impediment, it is finally nothing less than the gateway to a redemption from the sensuous: through the pain of my sensuous being, my mind “can make itself sensible to the appropriate sublimity of the sphere of its own being, even above nature” (Kant 1990a: §28, 108). Pain thus serves to lead to, and extinguish itself in, an ensuing delight of self-affirmation.

What this suggests is that in Kant's sublime experience pain not so much coincides and coexists with as *precedes* pleasure – and is replaced by it, forgotten through it. This sequential nature of Kantian sublime experience especially comes to light in the sections on the dynamical sublime. Here, Kant explicitly presents sublime experience as consisting of two successive feelings of pain and pleasure interrupted by a judgemental or reflective intervention. As Paul Guyer writes:

In the case of the dynamical sublime...Kant's exposition appears throughout to describe a pattern in which a painful feeling must be accompanied by an explicit *judgement* of the superiority of reason, with a further feeling of pleasure succeeding only once that judgement is made. For what Kant describes is essentially the case in which mighty objects or vistas in nature are first *felt* to be *fearsome* but in which it is then *judged* that there is no (moral) reason to be *afraid* of nature... – and only on the 'cessation' of this uneasiness due to this judgement does there arise 'a feeling of joy'. (Guyer 1996: 213)

Admittedly, and as has been subject to much debate, in the sections on the mathematical sublime Kant contradicts this sequential structure. Here, he posits sublime experience as one of pain and pleasure *at the same time*: the “feeling of the sublime is...at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a *simultaneously* awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas of reason” (Kant 1990a: §27, 102, my emphasis). Kant here seems

to argue that since the sublime concerns two different faculties of mind, it is simultaneously experienced as painful or repulsive to the one (imagination) and delightful or attractive to the other (reason) (ibid.: §27, 103). While this has a certain intriguing plausibility, it does not remove the fact that Kant here, too, interposes a judgement between pain and delight: once the pain of imagination is judged as being subjectively purposeful (i.e. in accord with reason), then pain gives way to delight.

This is, again, reaffirmed by the overall fact that Kantian sublime experience ends *without* pain; is, indeed, motivated by a drive toward a being purged from pain in a movement leading from the bounds of sense to the freedom of reason. It is an experience pervaded by what Theresa de Lauretis has in a different context called a "sense of an ending": a sense of purposefulness, progressing to a moment when the Kantian subject can close itself off from nature and, thus, from tension, frustration, or humiliation (De Lauretis 1984: 125). Sublime experience resolves itself in the resolving of pain, in the exorcising of frustration or humiliation.

As such, moving from pain to pleasure, one may readily suspect that Kant's sublime experience is knowingly or unknowingly conceived within the confines of a so-called canonic narrative structure. Within, basically said, the bounds of an Aristotelian plot of beginning, middle, and ending. To recall Aristotle's *Art of Poetry* on this issue, a narrative plot is to be a whole, and a whole

is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not necessarily come after something else, although something else exists or comes about after it. An end, on the contrary, is that which naturally follows something else either as a necessary or as a usual consequence, and is not itself followed by anything. A middle is that which follows something else, and is itself followed by something. Thus, well-constructed plots must neither begin nor end in a haphazard way, but must conform to the pattern I have been describing. (Dorsch 1965: 41)

Likewise, in Kantian sublime experience there is a (sudden) initial confrontation (beginning) leading to a predicament (middle: pain in the form of frustration, terror, or helplessness), which in turn leads to an overcoming of this predicament (ending: delight in the form of pride or joy). Or, which is the same, Kantian sublime experience moves from a moment of initiation, to a moment of certainty and stability lost, to a moment of certainty and stability regained. Revolving around a typical drama of self-transformation, it even features the familiar hero, the 'mobile character', of myth- and romance-plots, who actively submits himself to a trial to find and fulfil his personal destiny: honour gained

through peril (De Lauretis 1984: 118).¹² Nature, in all of this, is the immobile character. It is the obstacle to be overcome, “fixed at a certain point of the plot-space and representing, standing for...a boundary which the hero alone can cross” (ibid.: 118). As a mere occasion for frustration or fear, nature is but a necessary impediment to be confronted and defeated by the Kantian subject (hero) on his way to ‘manhood’ as an autonomous being. The story ends with the fulfilment of the hero’s quest, nature having completely disappeared from sight as the subject withdraws into itself to marvel at the sublimity of its own vocation (ibid.: 110).

As such, motivated by a “movement forward toward resolution”, Kantian sublime experience is defined by an ultimate reconciliation which I would like to define as a closure-in-transcendence: an achieved move ‘up’ that signals a conclusion to pain and discord (ibid.: 125). In conformity to mythological plot-texts, pain here only constitutes an intermediary if also crucial stage, functioning as it does as a bridge or passage to self-elevation and the delight annexed to it. This neatly coincides with the reconciliatory law governing Kantian sublime experience, i.e. that pain presumes its opposite, its own solution: the very inadequacy of imagination, and the very helplessness of my physical being is delightfully judged as disclosing my ‘superior’ position as a rational, moral being. Nature is neutralised, I become untouchable. I have elevated myself from a being of sense to a being of reason – and if this is how I prove myself to be a ‘person’ (a ‘man’) or even a hero, then this is also how I come to experience the sublime.

In this way, however, Kant’s harmonious, narrative model of sublime experience crudely passes over – what I have called in the general introduction – the *aporia* or *impassability* relative to the co-existing feelings of pain and pleasure of which this experience is composed. Kant thus threatens to undermine the irresolvable, self-conflicting nature of sublime experience by representing it as a sequential experience moving from pain to an obliterating of pain in an ultimate moment of

¹²De Lauretis here elaborates on Jurij M. Lotman’s “The Origin of Plot in the Light of Typology” (1973). Lotman argues that mythological plot-texts distinguish between mobile characters (heroes) that move freely in plot-space, and immobile ones that are fixed at certain points in, indeed, even embody a mere function of, this plot-space (such as Oedipus and the Sphinx) (De Lauretis 1984: 118-119). De Lauretis sees this distinction between mobile and immobile characters, between heroes and their obstacles, as *gendered morphologically*. What does this mean? Quite simply, it means that the hero and the obstacle the hero is to overcome are defined according to binary oppositions of subject/object, inside/outside, active/passive, passage/boundary, which have been culturally construed as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ respectively. Thus, though the hero may be a female character (which in traditional fiction is an exception), and the obstacle a male personage, the first nevertheless enacts the ‘masculine’ and the second the ‘feminine’ side of the divide. Seen in this light, “the hero, the mythical subject, is construed as a human being and as male; he is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction...Female is what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance” (ibid.: 119). ‘He’ moves – in, through, past ‘her’; ‘she’ remains.

closure-in-transcendence. What remains is an experience with a purpose and some suffering in-between, which makes for self-surpassing and uncannily fearless subjects looking even death sternly in the eye.

Aesthetic Ideas and Instrumental Music

Kant's epic of self-transcendence will, therefore, be of little use for a critical (re-)conception of sublime experience as a double feeling of pain and pleasure *at once*. I have already made this point in the general introduction, arguing that the Kantian sublime is an exponent of that dominant variety of the sublime-as-elevation which may well be traced all the way to *Peri Hypsos*. However, before delegating Kant respectfully to the world of the Enlightenment where rational subjects posit themselves as elevated '*Herrschafts*' over nature, one interesting issue raised by Kant in the third *Critique* remains to be examined (Peña Aguado 1991: 70). This issue concerns the aesthetic idea, a notion which will prove to be of much significance to Romantic critics and philosophers who like to see in art – the province of aesthetic ideas – a hint of something that strives beyond the limits of possible experience. Basically put, the aesthetic idea can be epitomized in terms of *suggestiveness*: it entails a representing something so vaguely or ambiguously that it can be "taken up and imaginatively developed" by a reader, listener, or viewer in many different, indeterminate ways (Crowther 1996: 67). In Kant's words, however, things are made rather more complicated:

...the aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination, annexed to a given concept, with which, in the free employment of the imagination, such a multiplicity of partial representations are bound up, that no expression indicating a definite concept can be found for it – one which on that account allows a concept to be supplemented in thought by much that is ineffable in words, and the feeling of which quickens the cognitive faculties...(Kant 1990a: §49, 167-168)

Here, Kant himself already indicates that aesthetic ideas can be seen as a counterpart of ideas of reason: the former concerns a representation which no (verbal) concept, no language, can cover exhaustively, the latter concerns a concept (Kant here uses the term *Begriff* for the sake of comparison) for which no intuition or representation is adequate (*ibid*: §49, 168). The former lacks a determinate language; the latter lacks an adequate picture. Yet in their being counterparts, both ideas also have something in common: both revolve around incompleteness. In both cases, something remains wanting on either a conceptual or on a representational level. Both ideas are somehow excessive, too much.

This excess at once posits a connection – or at least an intersection – between the mathematical sublime and aesthetic ideas. In both cases a without-limit that cannot be determined forces itself on the cognitive

faculties. Here, however, it is imagination that is the trouble maker and understanding that is forced to stretch itself beyond its own limits.¹³ As such, aesthetic ideas could well be said to present a sublime-in-reverse: imagination unsettles understanding when it is set free by a power called *genius* [*Genie*] and produces something which is not subsumable under the categories of understanding. On this basis, Renée van de Vall has proposed, one could imagine an alternative sublime in which productive imagination, though occasionally stirring the faculty of reason, in principle overwhelms the understanding – its immediate master – with an indeterminable richness of secondary or partial representations. As she suggests, “that which announces itself in the sublime *might not be the moral but the aesthetic idea*” (Van de Vall 1994: 330).¹⁴ It could be imagination, not reason triggering a sublime feeling, the central players here being – as in the feeling of the beautiful – imagination and understanding, whereby the former confounds the latter in such a way that it breaks through its synthesis of recognition (*ibid.*: 330).

This is, however, (fruitful) speculation – a speculation also spelled out by Lyotard (1994). He suggests that productive imagination may discover so much ‘around’ a given material, may create such an abundance of partial representations and remodel the material in such a radical way, that it overwhelms understanding as much as imagination is overwhelmed in the experience of the sublime: understanding can no longer recognize, can no longer perform its primary function in the triple synthesis. This is how thought would be interrupted and disrupted on account of aesthetic ideas: on account of a genius run wild in the free possibility of creating a multiplicity of forms. Of creating, in Kant’s terminology, a second nature out of the material that nature has in fact given to it – and which ‘second nature’, on account of its otherness,

¹³Kant, in fact, even proposes that not just the understanding but even the faculty of reason can be stirred by aesthetic ideas: “When to a concept [of understanding] is added a representation [*Vorstellung*] of imagination that belongs to its presentation, but for itself induces so much thought as can never be comprised in one determinate concept..., then imagination is here creative [*schöpferisch*] and actuates [*bringt...in Bewegung*] the capacity of intellectual ideas (Reason) to, namely, think more on the basis of a representation (which, it is true, belongs to a concept) than can be conceived [*aufgefaßt*] and clarified in it” (Kant 1990a: §49, 169). Reason is, as it were, running after aesthetic ideas, trying in vain to find a thought that will cover the (indeterminable) representation. Or, as Van de Vall observes, here imagination can “upset reason (and not just understanding!) just as much as in the sublime reason unsettles imagination” (Van de Vall 1994: 327).

¹⁴From a strictly Kantian perspective, this either/or-distinction between aesthetic and moral ideas would be curious. As Paul Guyer has already pointed out, Kant “assumes that the central concepts in aesthetic ideas will typically be...ideas about morality and the moral properties of humans and higher beings” (Guyer 1996: 159). Moreover, if aesthetic ideas materialize themselves in and through art, then in “responding to a work of genius, we can take pleasure in the freedom of imagination in its response to the form of the work [pertaining to the feeling of the beautiful] as well as to the moral significance of its content [pertaining to the aesthetic idea], and the experience of this freedom can serve as a more general symbol of morality itself” (*ibid.*: 160).

remains indeterminable and indefinable from the perspective of understanding (Lyotard 1994: 73-76).¹⁵

Though provoking, this rethinking of the sublime in terms of aesthetic ideas – which, as Lyotard emphasizes, should nevertheless not eliminate the differences between the two – nonetheless bypasses a golden rule in Kant's third *Critique*. This rule teaches that there is an in-built safety net in the mind called the power of *judgement*, which adapts the “lawless freedom” of productive imagination to the understanding, preventing fine art from deteriorating – in Kant's view – into sheer nonsense (Kant 1990a: §50, 175). Like taste, says Kant, judgement is the disciplining factor of genius, and if in the contradiction [*Widerstreit*] between the two a sacrifice is to be made it will be on the side of the latter: “the faculty of judgement...will sooner allow the freedom and richness of imagination to be harmed [*Abbruch zu tun erlauben*] than the understanding” (ibid.: §50, 175). Thus, the ‘sacrifice’ of understanding which Lyotard imagines with respect to the proliferation of aesthetic ideas would be impossible – or at least inadmissible – from a Kantian perspective: the power of judgement will see to it that the “wings” of genius are clipped in such a way that, though striving beyond the bounds of possible experience, it is still amenable to understanding (ibid.: §50, 175).

Therefore, one can say, although a reworking of the sublime in terms of the aesthetic idea might yield an alternative to Kant's sublime experience, this alternative is hardly conceivable within a strictly Kantian context. Interestingly, however, within a broader, historical-theoretical context such a reworking becomes rather more viable. Indeed, I will argue in the next chapter, the same suggestiveness, the same ambiguity that Kant attributes to aesthetic ideas had already made a previous appearance in eighteenth-century critical theory. It was, more precisely, already situated at the heart of the (artistic) *sublime* by earlier, Irish and Scottish critical theorists such as Edmund Burke, James Usher, and James Beattie. In their perspective, I will show, the sublime can only be evoked in art by means of the very imaginative indeterminacy that Kant was

¹⁵Lyotard recognizes this kind of confounding proliferation in the “‘excess’ of the baroque, of mannerism or of surrealism” (Lyotard 1994: 74). He hypothetically concludes that there is a familiarity-in-opposition between aesthetic ideas and the mathematical sublime that could be formulated as follows. The sublime revolves around an absence of form, a without-form, while in the case of aesthetic ideas genius “is crazy with forms and crazy about forms”; crazy about a free forming, a forming without the rules dictated by the understanding (ibid.: 75). Yet in both cases, there is a tension, a movement in the mind in which the cognitive faculties (imagination in case of the former, understanding in case of the latter) are overwhelmed. Or, differently said, a tension which, with respect to aesthetic ideas, can be traced to “the ‘much too much’ that defies the concept”, and with respect to the sublime, “the ‘almost nothing’ that defies form” – yet that is at the same time tied to a ‘much too much’, an inordinate demand of reason (ibid.: 76). Linking the ‘much too much’ to surrealism, I will show in chapter 7, Lyotard relates the ‘almost nothing’ to the abstractionism and abstract-expressionism of the avant-garde as embodied by Malevich and Barnett Newman.

later to associate with aesthetic ideas. Indeterminacy, rather than some higher moral destiny, forms the nexus of these pre-Kantian varieties of the sublime feeling, and in James Usher's case this will in fact lead to a conceiving of sublime experience as an *undecided* experience of two conflicting feelings of pain and pleasure *at once*: an interesting and viable alternative, in other words, to Kant's epically construed model.

Moreover, if the playful suggestiveness that Kant allots to aesthetic ideas is either knowingly or unknowingly derived from the suggestiveness that British critical theorists had deemed crucial for sublime evocation, then I will point out that this idea of suggestiveness can be largely traced to ruling, mid-eighteenth-century ideas on contemporary instrumental music. Kant himself, I should hasten to add, radically separates the art of instrumental music from the realm of aesthetic ideas. This realm is rather reserved for poetry, with a distant secondary position for painting, and no position at all for instrumental music. As Van de Vall puts it:

for Kant [in imitation of Burke], poetry is the art par excellence in which the capacity of aesthetic ideas can...develop itself. All his examples are literary examples; in fact they are all *analogies* or *metaphors*...Poetry therefore holds the highest rank: more than all the other arts it owes its existence to genius; less than all the other arts it is dictated by [empirical] rules or prescriptions. (Van de Vall 1994: 328)

Yet what about instrumental music? Is this not an art, post-Kantian, early German Romantics would argue, even less constrained by empirical rules and prescriptions as it ostensibly bypasses the visible, empirical world altogether? Perhaps, but Kant thought otherwise. Whatever their indeterminacy, he says, aesthetic ideas are still always annexed to a given concept, while instrumental music operates in the absence of any concept whatsoever. Aesthetic ideas *rely*, in fact, on concepts, albeit in a free and playful manner. If they raise much and perhaps much elusive thought on account of a vague representation, music for Kant raises no thoughts at all. He brands music as the most superficial and "least urbane" of all the arts, as it is transient, forcing itself on others like the bad smell of a pervasive odour. Decisively, he rejects it as an empty, meaningless art of and for the senses, not for the cognitive faculties – and it is precisely the latter which are said to be 'quickened' by aesthetic ideas (Kant 1990a: §53, 187). Or, as Kant puts it later on, in music the "play" with aesthetic ideas moves from a "bodily sensation to aesthetic ideas..., and from these then back again, with united force, to the body" (ibid.: §54, 190). Thus, the problem is that this play does not start with thought [*Gedanken*] but with the body, and can never move beyond the body.

Nevertheless, as Kevin Barry has exhaustively shown in his *Language, Music, and the Sign* (1987), in eighteenth-century British critical theory, ruling conceptions of instrumental music as an art communicating things at best incompletely and indirectly, had been of vital importance to a

rethinking of language in general, and poetry in particular. This rethinking basically concerned an anti-pictorial conception of language as raising no distinct images to the mind – as not-showing instead of showing, as operating by means of suggestion instead of imitation (Barry 1987: cf. 1-18). As, in Kantian terminology, being conducive to aesthetic ideas or, in Burkean terminology, being particularly appropriate for artistic evocations of the sublime. In this (indirect) way, I will show in the following chapter, eighteenth-century ideas on contemporary instrumental music can be seen to play an unsuspected though crucial role in pre-Kantian theories on the sublime. Though either marginalized, de-centred, or ignored in twentieth-century criticism, these pre-Kantian theories nevertheless notably achieve what Kant's third *Critique* fails to achieve: they open the way toward a conception of sublime experience as a genuinely paradoxical mixture of pain and pleasure at the same time that resists a conclusive resolution. Kant's problematic moment of closure-in-transcendence seems absent here – indeed, what is stressed, is the absence of an ending in the deadlock of two opposing, irreconcilable feelings.